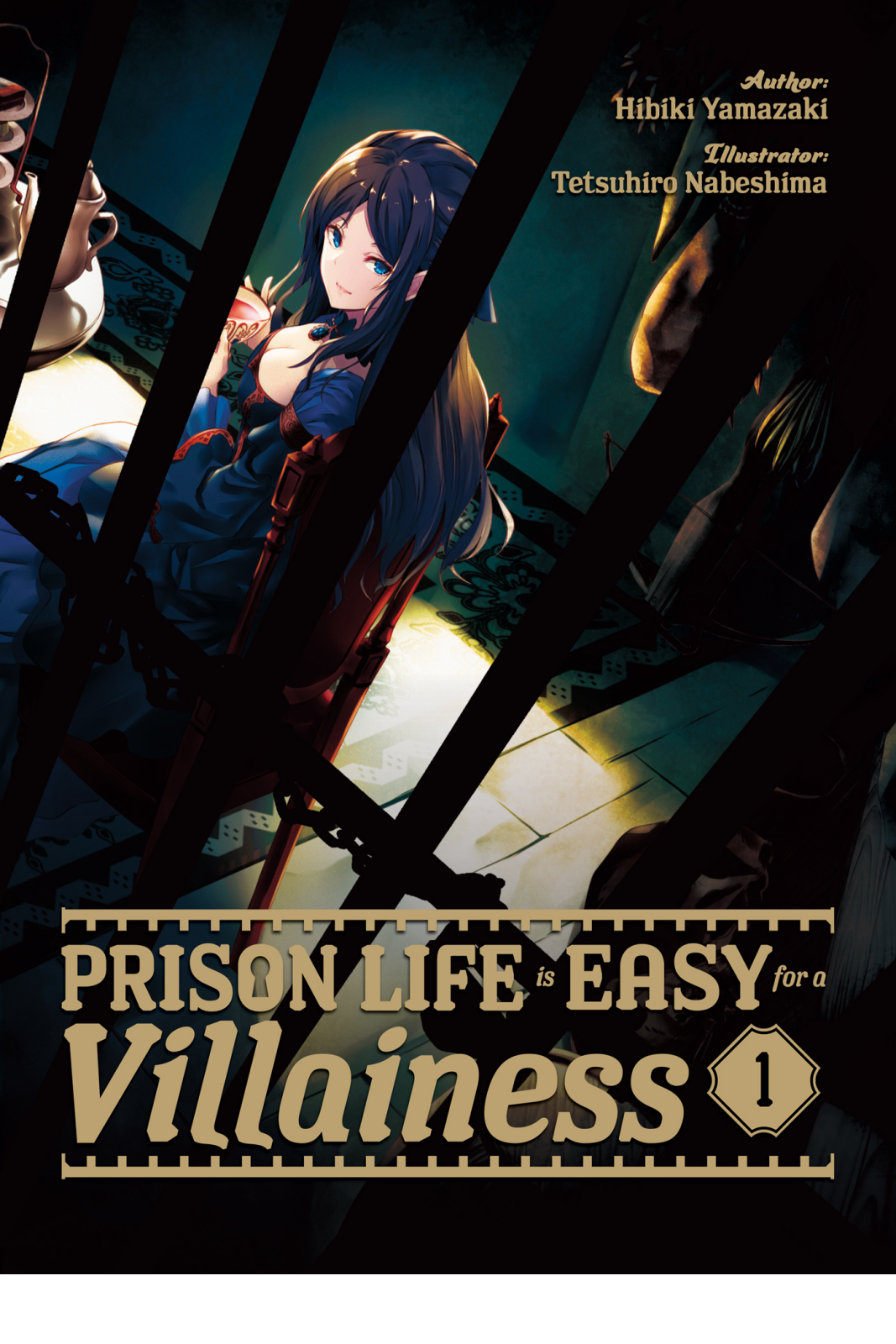


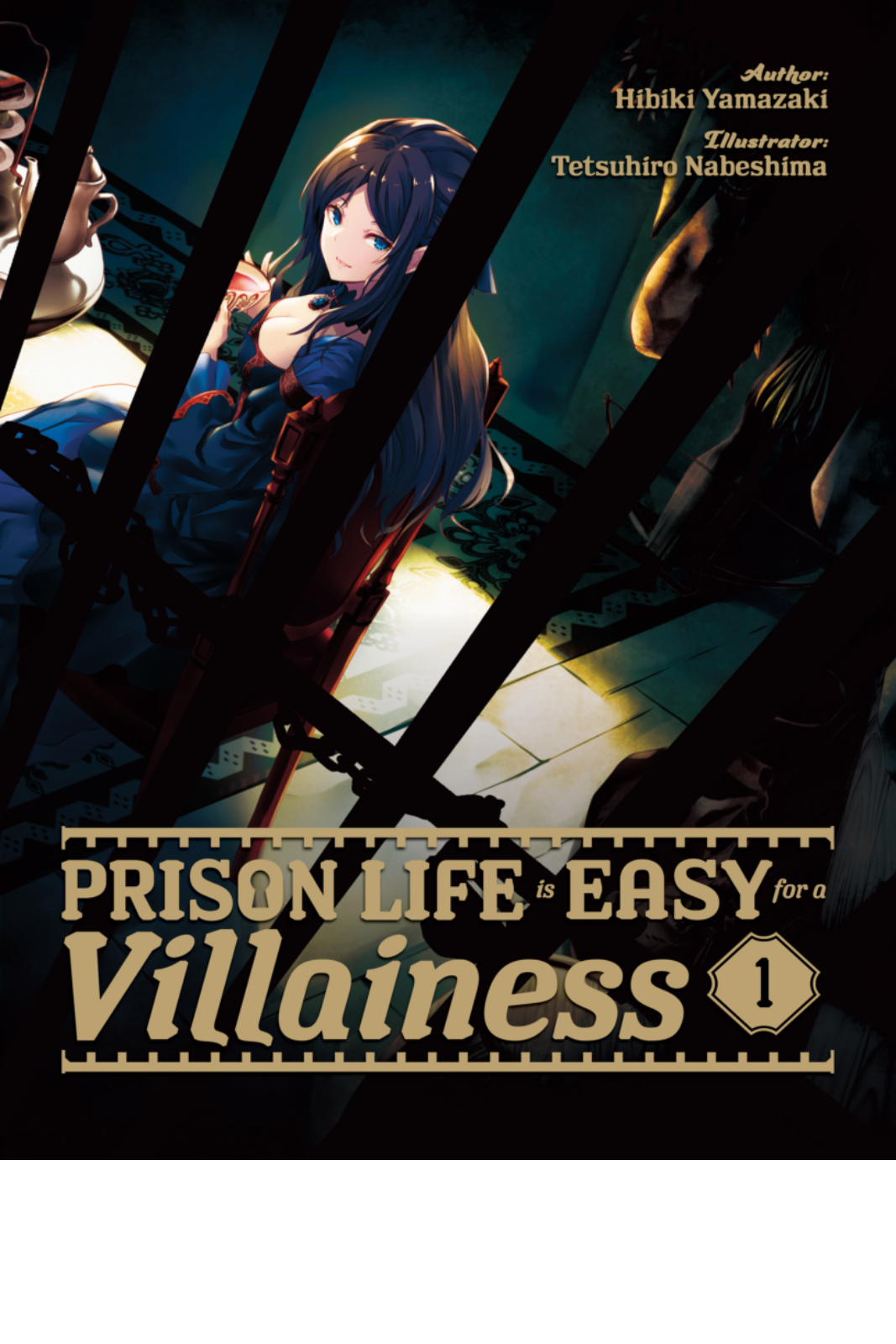


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PRISON LIFE *is* EASY *for a*
Villainess 1

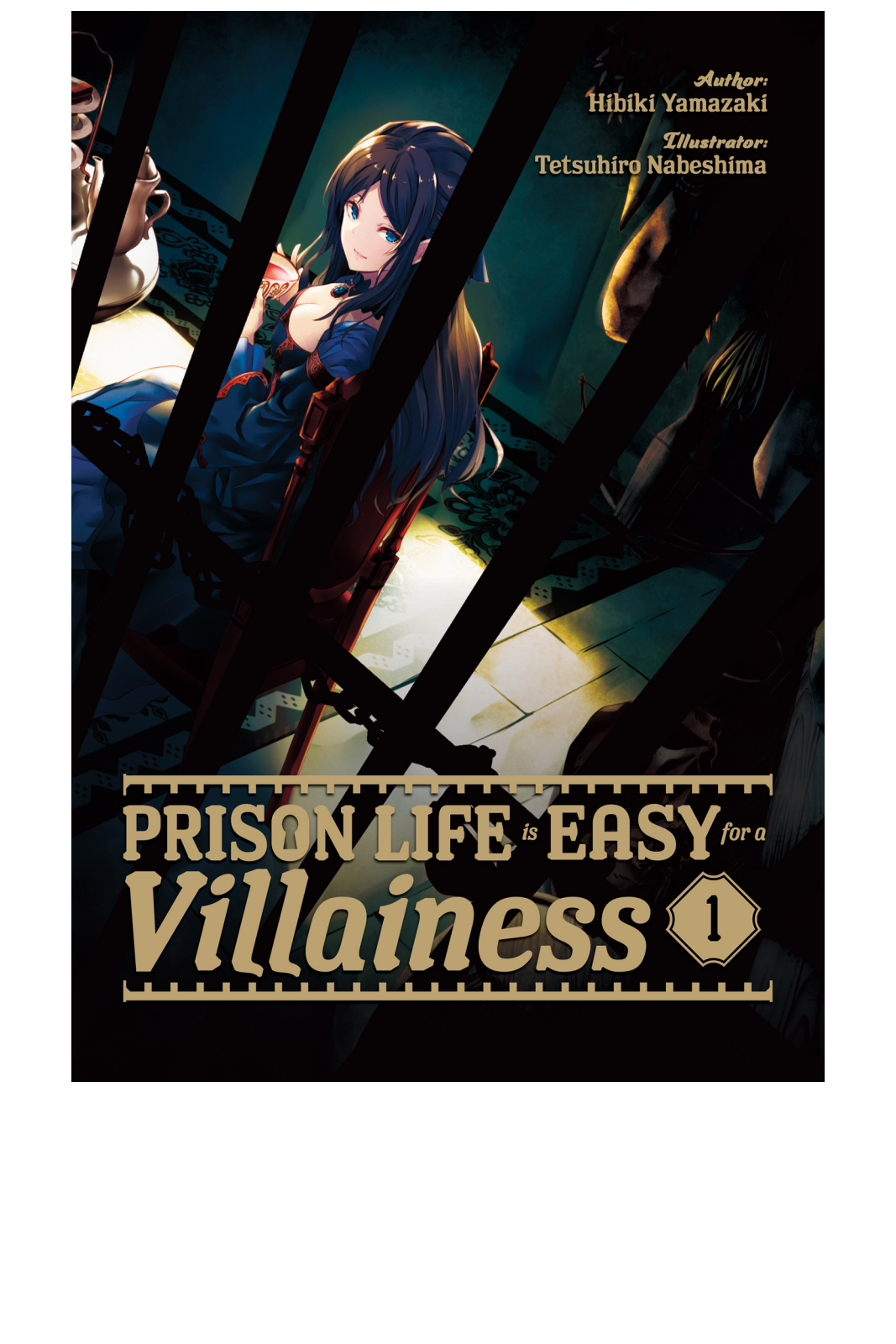


The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration. A young woman with long, flowing blue hair and blue eyes is the central figure. She is wearing a blue, low-cut dress with red lacing and is seated in a wooden chair. She holds a small red apple in her right hand. To her left, a large, ornate teapot sits on a surface. To her right, a large, dark, horned head is visible. The scene is lit with dramatic, low-key lighting, creating strong highlights and deep shadows. The overall tone is mysterious and slightly ominous.

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PRISON LIFE *is* EASY *for a*
Villainess **1**



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PRISON LIFE *is* EASY *for a*
Villainess 1

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Chapter 1: The Young Lady Moves

01: The Young Lady Is Sent to Prison

Up until this moment, guests of the royal family had been enjoying a lively evening party. However, every attendee soon fell silent as the prince abruptly declared he was breaking off his engagement.

In the middle of the luxurious banquet hall, a dignified young man with radiant golden locks cascading down his shoulders stood with his arms crossed. He was the king's eldest son, Prince Elliott. Behind him stood a darling young lady, her red hair styled in pigtails. She wrapped her arms around the prince, and they both fixed their eyes on a young lady as the prince's associates dragged her in front of them.

She was a demure girl, and she maintained her composure even in this situation, quietly allowing the prince's associates to pull her forward. Her name was Rachel, and she was the eldest daughter of Duke Ferguson, and now the prince's ex-fiancée.

Elliott shifted to stand in front of the young lady with the red hair, as if to protect her. She quivered behind him. He glared at Rachel as his associates restrained her.

"Rachel, if you have even a shred of decency, then apologize to Margaret!" Elliott said in a tone both critical and sharp.

"The game is up, you witch!" cried Sykes Abigail, the knight commander's son, as he twisted Rachel's arms. "We know you're the one who provoked the other ladies of the court!"

Even Rachel's brother, George Ferguson, joined in and denounced her. "Please, sister. Just be honest and confess your crimes. How much longer will you continue to drag the Ferguson name through the mud?"

Unfazed by their abuse, Rachel looked back at the prince, her expression cold. "I've done no such thing. There is no reason I should apologize to your girlfriend."

Rachel was a beautiful woman with dark brown hair she kept tied up and clear, pale skin. Her almond-shaped eyes, a deep cobalt blue, shone with intelligence. Her lips were a light pink. The dress she wore was simple, and the color was subdued, a demonstration of class rather than gaudiness. Her whole appearance gave off an air of maturity, and though she was the same age as Elliott, her reserved

manner and plain appearance made her seem years older than him.

Rachel repeated her denial in a quiet tone that fit her image perfectly. Compared to the prince, who'd spoken in anger, her attitude lent her words a certain gravitas.

The prince found that infuriating. In fact, one of the things that irritated Elliott the most was that she was acting no different than usual.

Why is she so defiant?! he thought.

Rachel was reserved, and she rarely, if ever, asserted herself. She was a model lady, there to support the men, which was probably why she'd been chosen as the prince's fiancée. But despite her unassertive demeanor, she would still chide Elliott for his lack of composure.

Because of that, Elliott's heart had drifted away from her. Or rather, he'd never managed to grow fond of her due to her attitude toward him. She always treated him like a child who needed reprimanding. Conversely, Elliott's response was evidence that he still had a lot of maturing to do.

Elliott had always felt that Rachel was in his way, and now she had allegedly harmed the young lady he loved most of all. He had a strong desire to punish his ex-fiancée for refusing to apologize.

"Enough!" Elliott yelled. "Rachel, it seems I was wrong to give you a chance to reflect on your actions."

The prince gestured with his chin, and Sykes began dragging Rachel off to the dungeon.

"Life is long, Rachel. Do enjoy your time in prison."

He saw Rachel's lips twist at his mocking tone, her first real reaction. However, it wasn't the look of disgrace he had hoped for, but an ironic smile.

"Oh, I will, Your Highness. This is a rare opportunity, so I intend to enjoy it at my leisure."

This was an unusual show of emotion—a look of scorn—from the duke's daughter who was known for her placidity. But before the prince could dwell on what it meant, Sykes dragged Rachel from the banquet hall.



Rachel stared coldly at her fiancé as he arrogantly spouted his faulty logic.

This guy is utterly hopeless.

It was said that men were slower to develop mentally in childhood, but even taking that into account, Elliott was still far too dull. He was nearly an adult, and he was acting like this?

Rachel could do nothing but sigh. The idea that she would go out of her way to harass an inconsequential girl was absurd. It galled her

that he thought she had that much time on her hands. Her supposed crime was risible, and the way he'd condemned her with that serious look made her want to laugh out loud. Did he have even the slightest conception of how difficult the education was for someone who was going to marry into the royal family? Did these people even have brains at all?

In all honesty, Rachel had no particular desire to marry Prince Elliott, nor did she especially want to become queen. She was merely doing her duty as a daughter of a ducal family. Why did she have to fight over this nitwit with a woman she barely knew, a woman who'd concocted this infantile scheme? Rachel had only played the role of fiancée out of a sense of familial obligation, and she was already sick and tired of this ridiculous farce. In fact, she was ready to throw everything away out of sheer apathy.

A snide voice brought her out of her thoughts.

"Life is long, Rachel. Do enjoy your time in prison."

When that talentless prince uttered those uninspiring words with his inflated sense of self-importance, Rachel could no longer hold her poker face. She cracked a smile.

"Oh, I will, Your Highness. This is a rare opportunity, so I intend to enjoy it at my leisure."

Oh, forget my noble duties. Who cares what happens to this buffoon?

The prince was reveling in what he thought was a sudden announcement, but Rachel had already heard about his plan from multiple sources. She hadn't expected it to play out exactly as her informants had said, though. Still, he had torn up their engagement, so it looked like her *preparations* wouldn't go to waste.

Elliott was so predictable that Rachel couldn't stop the little smile that slipped onto her lips. When she caught herself nearly grinning, she relaxed her face and kept it as expressionless as possible as Sykes dragged her away.

The prince had kindly given the order. Now she was going to forget all about her lessons and enjoy herself.

Rachel was actually a little excited for this new lifestyle, shut away in the disused dungeons beneath the palace. Without the rigorous requirements of a future queen. Without a schedule planned down to the minute. Without a head maid to complain when she took a nap, or a tutor to strike her with a pointer when she slacked off to read books.

She would have all the time in the world. Teatime would be any time she pleased. If she wanted to, she could sleep the day away without anyone getting upset. It would be a slow prison life where she could amuse herself to her heart's content.

Fighting the urge to start skipping, Rachel trudged out of the hall

with heavy feet that belied her actual feelings.

02: The Young Lady Shuts Herself in the Prison

Hearing the sound of footsteps on the stone stairs, the prison guard on patrol in the dungeon looked up. In the flickering light of a lantern, he could see a well-built young man pulling along a girl. Her clothes were of the highest, yet she was bound with ropes.

Just as the guard was thinking that they made an odd couple, the young man yelled at him.

“Are you the prison guard?” Sykes arrogantly asked.

“Yes, sir. I am.”

The guard had no idea what was going on as he watched Sykes, having reached the basement, untie the girl and shove her from behind.

“Throw this wretch in a cell. Prince Elliott commands it. We haven’t decided when we’ll release her yet. Well, I guess that’ll all depend on how well she reflects on her actions.”

“Ah, is that right?” the guard said rather unenthusiastically.

Sykes scowled. “What?”

“You see, um, about the prison...”

Sykes followed the guard’s line of sight and realized that the jail...had been converted into a storage closet.

“What is this?” he exclaimed, caught off guard. Various-sized wooden boxes were piled inside the prison. Near the back, they rose almost all the way to the ceiling. They took up more than half the cell, although it wasn’t clear what was inside them.

“Well, some bureaucrats happened to come by here just this afternoon, and they said they needed to temporarily store some things they no longer need in there,” the guard explained. He scratched his head awkwardly as Sykes stared in blank amazement. “We rarely ever use the palace dungeon, you know? I would never have expected a guest to be staying so soon.”

“Why do they have to be using it as a glorified closet *now*?” Sykes lamented.

“Well, it’s my first time seeing this happen too. But we so rarely use the cells that there wasn’t any reason to refuse.”

Sykes clicked his tongue. So the bureaucrats had brought in some documents or something that needed to be stored somewhere, had they? The timing was poor, but he could see that there was still sufficient space between the cell door and the toilet. Fine. That would be enough for Rachel to lie down.

“It is what it is. Just throw this witch in there. And I don’t want any lip from *you* about it being too crowded. Be grateful you’re not

sharing a room with a criminal.”

“I understand,” Rachel said meekly.

Sykes motioned to the prison guard with his chin. The guard opened the cell door, which was at one end of the iron bars, with his key.

Having figured out the situation, the guard’s smile turned scummy. “A well-to-do lady like yourself may find this place a little creepy, but, well, they say a man’s home is his castle, right? Give it a week and I’m sure you’ll settle right in. Try to think of it as a unique inn and enjoy yourself. Not that I know how many *years* you’ll be here.”

Rachel listened to the guard’s intimidating spiel, which he’d likely plucked right out of the manual, and silently walked through the door. The guard closed the door behind her and locked it. Then he rattled the door to ensure that it was completely secure, as was tradition.

The guard smirked at her as she quietly sat down inside the cell. “If you’re going to cry to somebody important for help, you’d best do it early, for your own good, you know? This underground prison is rarely used these days. It’s not easy to find either, and I tend to forget who’s down here.”

Sykes laughed. “Ha ha ha, the man has a point. His Highness wants to forget about you and have a good time with Margaret. I’d suggest you bow your head to him before he forgets we threw you in here.”

Sykes and the guard turned to leave, laughing scornfully at the dim-witted fool of a girl. They left behind the duke’s daughter, crushed by what had happened to her...or so they thought.

Just as Sykes and the prison guard were about to ascend the stairs...

Rattle, rattle. Ka-chunk!

“Ka...chunk?” Sykes muttered, mimicking what he’d heard. Both he and the guard turned toward the strange noises.

Rachel had been sitting there dejectedly, but now she was wrapping a large chain around the door and metal bars. Then she put a padlock on it.

This was her moment, the moment she could strike back and harass them.

“Huh?” the guard blurted.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Sykes stammered. He ran up to the bars, but Rachel had already finished locking up. “Hey, what is this?!” Using his well-toned muscles, he shook the door, but it was tightly chained and wouldn’t budge an inch.

On the other side, Rachel watched him with a cool expression. “What,’ you ask? I have ensured the door is locked for my own

safety.”

“This is a prison, you know?!” Sykes shouted. “The prisoners aren’t the ones who lock it up!”

Rachel remained blasé as she explained, “I am still an unwed woman. I couldn’t bear it if anything untoward were to happen to me. After all, I’ve heard the guards get their jollies by cavorting with the prisoners when their superiors aren’t looking.”

“Still, this is unprecedented! Where did you even get that chain and lock?!”

“That is my business, not yours,” Rachel said, refusing to dignify his question with an answer.

Sykes and the guard were speechless. Although they’d locked her in, it was as if she had shut herself up in there.

“Wh-What should we do?” the prison guard asked.

Sykes shook his head. “Don’t ask me...”

“Well, what *are* you going to do?” Rachel interjected.

“No, don’t *you* say that!” Sykes snapped.

“No, no. Given that this directly affects me, I have every right to speak, don’t I?” Rachel countered, her tone serious.

“Wh-When you put it that way, I suppose you have a point...”

“Well, what’s it going to be? Come on, hurry up. How about an opinion?!”

Sykes, who wasn’t used to thinking about anything particularly difficult, broke under Rachel’s pressure and started to panic.

“Didn’t I ask you what it’s going to be?!” Rachel continued. “Come on, out with it! Now, now, now, now, now!”

“Stop! Don’t rush me, okay?! Uh, what do I even do about this?” As he had more brawn than brains, Sykes couldn’t keep up. He could only think of one thing to do. “F-First, I’ll report this to the prince.”

The son of the commander of the knights practically fell over himself on his way out of the dungeon, racing back to the party to call the prince.

03: The Young Lady Renovates the Prison

In the gaudy banquet hall, Elliott and his hangers-on were enjoying yet another loud toast as they ignored all the people around them speaking in hushed voices.

“Ha ha ha ha! Oh, this is delightful!” Elliott exclaimed.

Margaret congratulated him. “You’ve finally done it, Your Highness!”

“Yes, finally, I’ve brought that horrible woman to account for her crimes! Margaret, I thank you for your help.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t do anything.”

The people watching all hooted. The mood had turned romantic, and Elliott and Margaret no longer cared who saw them. Their faces drew closer together, and then...

“Your Highness!!!”

A well-built young man raced into the hall.

“Sykes, you have the worst timing,” Elliott scoffed, glaring at the commander of the knights’ son.

Sykes grabbed Elliott’s arm. “We have an emergency! Please, come at once!”

“Hey, what is this about?”

Panicking, Sykes began to drag Elliott away. He pulled the prince through the crowd, looking a bit like a jilted ex abducting the bride in the middle of her wedding.

Before he could chastise Sykes for this indignity, Elliott needed to calm him down or he was going to get hurt. He slapped the hand Sykes was using to grip his arm and yelled, “Hey, stop pulling! Your grip is too tight, and it hurts!”

“Oh, sorry!” Sykes hurriedly let go.

Elliott thought he could finally ask what was the matter, but Sykes wasn’t giving up.

“Now, please, come this way!” he cried.

“Huh?! Hey, stop it!”

Sykes scooped Elliott up in his arms, carrying him like a princess, and ran off at a speed that would put a horse to shame.

The people left behind began whispering immediately.

“Sykes...j-just took Prince Elliott? Wh-What does that mean?”

Margaret asked, cocking her head.

“Oh, goodness! Does this mean his true love is Lord Abigail?!”

“No, from the way things were just now... Wait, is our haughty prince the bottom?!”

“We’ll have to let everyone who couldn’t make it here today know!”

The young ladies watching from a distance continued to spread important information that could affect Elliott’s position.



By the time Sykes found Elliott and pulled him off to the dungeon—using methods he never should’ve performed in public—the situation had progressed, which is to say it had gotten even worse.

“For goodness sake, what has Rachel done this—? Wha?!”

Elliott, who had been grumbling the whole way, was dumbstruck. Sykes had thought he was prepared, but even he was speechless at what he saw now. It was far beyond anything he’d imagined. The prison had completely transformed in a mere thirty minutes.



The dungeon was a large, square room divided in two by iron bars. In front of the bars was a room for the prison guards to stand by and monitor, and at one end of the wall, there was a staircase made out of the same stone as the rest of the room. The only furniture was a simple table and chair; there was no need for more because interrogations were carried out at the royal guard's office. Likewise, palace servants brought the inmates' meals from the kitchens, so there was no cooking equipment either.

Behind the bars was the back room, which was what everyone called the "dungeon." This was where the prisoners were kept. The interior consisted of stone walls, a stone floor, and a stone ceiling, the same as the front room. There was a toilet and shower in the corner, as well as a sink. The iron bars were the only thing separating the back room from the front room, so essentially it was one big room.

Being a dungeon, it was largely underground. Only a number of long, thin windows high up on the wall let in light and fresh air. They were designed to look like vents that went under the floor when viewed from outside, and they were, of course, barred. They were the only source of light in the room, so without a lamp or candle, the dungeon was gloomy even in the middle of the day.

Quality of life in this dreary place depended on the position of the person detained, and on the magnanimity of whoever put them in here. If the prisoner needed special consideration, or if the person who'd jailed them was feeling merciful, they could lead a reasonably civilized life here. They might receive furniture and carpets, tables and chairs, and a divider to go around the toilet and shower so that no one could see them.

If they were meant to suffer, or if the person in charge was cruel by nature, the prisoner would receive none of those things. They would huddle on the bare stone, shivering in the cold and eating food off trays left on the floor. Every time they defecated or bathed, they would be in full sight of the guard.

These conditions would make most people shudder, even more so if they were to be imprisoned here. Yet most of this was nothing more than urban legend. These days, it was almost unthinkable to use the dungeon at all. The treatment of prisoners had become much more humane, and those who were due some consideration were instead locked in inescapable guest rooms where they were kept under close surveillance. As for petty criminals, there was no need to imprison them in the royal palace in the first place. There was a perfectly good prison on the outskirts of the city. They could go there along with the commoners.

This dungeon had been built a long, long time ago, when treason and conspiracies were a fact of life, in order to torment those of influence who'd fallen from power. Now, after such a long time of peace, only nobles or courtiers would be imprisoned here, and only the ones who were to be treated worse than ordinary prisoners, making the existence of this place rather contradictory.

Rachel Ferguson was just the sort of person who fit those conditions. She was the daughter of a duke, but having incurred the prince's wrath, she was expected to suffer horribly. There just weren't people like that these days. She was a rare specimen.

As for whether Prince Elliott had thought that deeply about it...he did not. He'd just wanted to stick Rachel in an awful place and bully her for picking on his darling Margaret. It never occurred to him what the living situation in here might be like. The prince had only thought that if he imprisoned Rachel in a way that was humiliating for any noble, she would kowtow before Margaret and beg for forgiveness. And he wouldn't be unwilling to grant it. That was as far as his thoughts had gone.

In fact, while he was flirting with Margaret after expelling Rachel from polite society, Elliott had forgotten all about such "trivial details" until Sykes dragged him here. That was why he had no idea why his friend had insisted that he come look at that terrible woman.

But when Prince Elliott arrived at the prison...he couldn't comprehend the scene unfolding in front of him.



Inside the dungeon, the duke's daughter was relaxing on the floor. She should have been sitting on stone tile, but instead she sat on a throw rug with geometrical designs on it. The formerly exposed toilet and shower area now had a flowery curtain hanging around it. On top of the throw rug was a comfy, cushioned sofa that could have dragged even a sage down into a life of sloth. She moved to it and lay there reading a book. Of course, next to her was a light bright enough to read by.

The inmate who had just arrived today had already changed out of her evening dress and into something more simple and casual. She had been thrown in there with only what she was wearing at the time, so how had she been able to change? Where did she get the furniture?

It was impossible. Everything about this scene was impossible. On the other side of those bars was the dungeon. It had to be. Yet the bare stone walls now held a comfortable living space.

As all who were present stared speechless at this incomprehensible scene, the young lady appeared to notice something and sat up.

“Hm?”

Rachel resolutely ignored everyone on the other side of the bars as she lifted the kettle from atop her alcohol lamp and poured the boiling water into a teapot. The scent of black tea seemed out of place wafting through a dreary jail cell.

“Mmm!” Rachel smiled in satisfaction as she took a whiff.

Elliott’s jaw dropped even further at the absurdity of a *tea set* inside the prison. Sykes and the prison guard looked at each other, but not a word was spoken.



At least five seconds passed before the prince snapped back to his senses and grabbed the iron bars.

“You! Where did you get that?!”

“I provided it for myself. It puts no strain on the treasury,” Rachel replied curtly.

“That’s not the problem!”

“These are my personal effects. You have no right to complain about them.”

“I said that’s not the problem!” the prince repeated, even louder this time. He ground his teeth, angry that they were just talking *at* each other. “Where did you get all of that stuff in there?!”

Rachel looked around, as if there were something missing, then opened one of the wooden boxes and took out some tea biscuits. It was one of the wooden boxes that were supposedly no longer needed. Yes, they were the very same boxes that had been there before Rachel was thrown in.

“That’s how she did it?!” Sykes shouted.

“What?!” Elliott barked.

The prison guard explained what had happened to the confused prince.

Now that Elliott knew how the trick had worked, he started to get dizzy as he watched his ex-fiancée happily nibble on cookies and sip black tea.

“Y-You’re telling me she saw this coming and brought her family’s siege supplies in here?” the prince muttered to himself, shocked.

“My people brought them here for me, to be precise,” Rachel replied, unconcerned. “Well, as you can see, I was prepared for this eventuality.”

Ignoring the speechless prince, Rachel opened her book to the place she had bookmarked and resumed reading.

Everyone recognized Rachel Ferguson’s beauty, yet she had a strange lack of presence, to the point where people would forget she was attending a reception alongside the prince. Her delicate features showed little emotion, and she basically never spoke or expressed an opinion. Even when she was asked to venture one, she would agree with whatever the prince had said. The way she acted like the prince’s shadow made her a convenient target, and her rivals for Elliott’s affections often attacked her for lacking flair and said she didn’t deserve him.

She was an unobtrusive accessory to the prince’s radiant beauty—an attractive fiancée who stayed out of the way. With no sense of self, her most endearing quality was how she reservedly supported the prince. It was why he’d found her dull.

Elliott had assumed that because she was that kind of woman, she wouldn't dare push back against his condemnation, which was why he'd done it in such a public venue.

But now, Elliott was perplexed. Who was this woman, doing as she pleased in this ridiculous place?

04: The Duke Realizes the Situation

Duke Ferguson received word that the prince had terminated his engagement to Rachel at a party attended by many of the young members of the court. The situation was unbelievable, and as the head of a ducal house, he was preparing to make an emergency visit to the palace. He had sent his retainers out to gather information to help him grasp the situation.

As the duke panicked, his men came back one after another with bad news.

"Are you certain that the prince broke off his engagement with Rachel at tonight's party?" the duke asked.

"Yes, sir. We were able to confirm that with multiple sources. She was restrained in the middle of the hall as he announced the annulment."

The duke clutched his head. "That fool of a prince! I'm sure he wanted to make a spectacle of it, but doesn't he realize that wasn't the place for it?! This isn't a matter of who was in the wrong; it's common sense."

The duke had already concluded that the prince was ruined. If you viewed the situation logically, it was plain to see that the way he theatrically broke off their betrothal, completely disregarding proper manners and customs, would become a problem once the king stepped in to resolve things.

Naturally, the duke was upset that his daughter's engagement had been broken without a word to him about it first, but in all honesty, he had a bigger problem now.

He slammed his hands down on his desk. "That vacuous moron. He's gone and awakened the devil child!"



The duke's eldest daughter, Rachel, had been pretty from a young age, and her reserved behavior and ephemeral appearance had led other houses to assume that she was an introverted and quiet beauty. Not knowing any better, the duke and duchess had been incredibly proud of her. They'd believed wholeheartedly that their daughter was wonderful.

They couldn't have been more wrong.

As their daughter grew, and they gradually came to see who she was, the duke and duchess's smiles became more strained. She acted worse than the average bully.

When a group of bullies chased her up a tree, she threw a beehive at them. Then, when an older boy came to back them up, she clobbered him with a rolling pin she'd been hiding. Once that was done, she pushed the ringleader into a pond for revenge.

Hearing the ruckus, the duke rushed to investigate, and he spotted her throwing rocks at the boy as he tried to get to shore. When he stopped her, she looked at him and, with a completely serious expression, said, "Don't worry. If I keep throwing rocks at him, he won't float to the surface for a while."

It was at this moment that the duke first thought there was a high probability that his beloved daughter was a psychopath.

In order to dissuade her, the duke pointed out the difficulty of piling rocks on top of an object underwater, and he explained how the resistance of the water as they sank and the irregular shape of the rocks would make it hard to determine their course. It was evident from this exchange that the duke was panicking a bit.

His daughter, eyes sparkling, exclaimed, "That's amazing, father!" But, in all honesty, this was the first time that her praise went in one ear and out the other.

Once her parents realized how warped Rachel was, they put a touching amount of effort into making sure she developed a degree of sociability commensurate with her good looks by the time she was grown. The duke felt that after he'd explained that manners and morals were like the rules of a game and that order existed so everyone had a fair chance to play, she grew into their ideal daughter.

But the duke and duchess never forgot. If Rachel were to ever stop thinking that she had to follow the rules, they had no idea what their daughter might do. That was why they had focused so heavily on giving her the moral education necessary for a child of the nobility.

Despite their every contingency, this termination of her engagement...they never saw it coming.

The duke knew better than anyone what had just happened. Prince Elliott, the damned fool, had just gone and upended the chessboard.



As the duke barked orders, driven by the need to get ahead of this as soon as possible, a servant rushed into the room, out of breath.

"We've received more details!"

"Has there been any movement?!" the duke asked.

The retainer, blue in the face, began his report. The duke, stressed

to the max, listened intently.

"I'll explain in detail. The young lady accepted His Highness's announcement without any change in expression, and she remained quiet as she was restrained and marched off to the dungeon."

The duke froze for a moment before slumping into his chair like he'd collapsed. The butler rushed to his side.

The duke stared absently into space for a while, then mumbled, "The prince... He's done for."

The butler, who was well acquainted with Rachel's upbringing, nodded gravely and said, "Yes, sir."

If Rachel had already decided to act, it was out of the duke's hands. He had no choice but to let her do as she pleased and wait until she'd blown off some steam.

No longer in a rush, the duke sat in front of his desk and slowly put tobacco in his pipe.

I think I'll have a smoke, he told himself. Yes, that's what I'll do. Because there's nothing else I can do.

The duke was filled with a great many emotions as he took a puff and exhaled. Then, he remembered something.

"Still, George must have been at the party. What is he doing now?"

George would have been close to the prince as one of his hangers-on. If he'd acted to mediate the issue or reported to the duke before things developed to this point, this uproar could have been dealt with before it got out of hand.

As the duke let out an exhausted sigh, the servant who'd brought the reports hesitantly delivered a follow-up about George.

"Well, you see... It seems the young master is as infatuated with the baroness's daughter, who was at the center of this drama, as His Highness and the others. He was an active participant in their condemnation of her."

The duke and the butler looked at each other.

"George...is a dead man."

"Yes, sir."

"How, after sixteen years of living with his sister, could that imbecile not understand something so simple?"

George had to have seen that Rachel was running wild, so what was he thinking?

If Rachel's anger toward her brother were to explode, the duke had no intention of defending his son and heir. That could get him caught in the crossfire. The duke valued his own hide far more than that of the idiot son who had ruined everything.

As the duke looked up at the ceiling and took a puff from his pipe, there was a ruckus in the hall, and his wife raced into the room.

“Oh, Dan!”

“Iseria!”

The duke hurried to his feet as his stumbling wife leapt into his arms.

“It’s Rachel, she...she’s...”

“I know. I was just listening to the reports. Try to be strong!”

The duchess had completely lost her head, and she continued shouting with tears in her eyes.

“But, darling! If she let them escort her away...then she plans to kill him! The future of our house and His Majesty’s life are all about to shatter!”

“It’s going to be fine! Rachel is seventeen now. She’s not a child. She’s old enough to make adult decisions.”

The duke tried to console his sobbing wife with words he didn’t believe. However, she took no comfort in them.

“Dan, you don’t understand. When she was just a little girl, I caught her singing ‘Lizzie Borden’ while gleefully swinging an ax!”

“Calm yourself, Iseria! It’s fine. It’s going to be fine! Rachel has grown into a proper young lady in the last ten years. These days, we don’t have to worry about her bludgeoning His Highness to death with a blunt instrument. I’m sure she’ll use hard-to-prosecute methods to destroy his psyche!”

“Really? Is Rachel really going to be okay? She might well burn the capital to the ground to kill him.”

“Believe in your daughter, Iseria. She is smart and well educated. She’d never do something stupid that would take her down with him. I’m sure she’ll employ methods that leave no trace to absolutely demolish him.”

What was his daughter thinking right now? Was he *sure* she wouldn’t resort to a weapon? The duke had no idea. He didn’t even know how to resolve this situation. All he could do at this juncture was sigh.

A number of servants had gathered around the two of them, but they’d all been with the family far too long to comment on the current situation.



“Pardon me.”

As the duke was rubbing his wife’s back comfortingly, a person with a voice so utterly calm it seemed out of place in this nervous excitement sought permission to enter the room.

Looking to see who it was, the duke found Rachel’s personal maid

and childhood friend, Sofia, bowing her head.

“Oh, Sofia. Your timing is perfect. Have you heard about Rachel?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“I will be heading to the government office to lodge an immediate complaint. You will be accompanying me, so get ready. You’ll bring Rachel the things she’ll need while she’s in prison. If they refuse, use my name to make them let you through.”

Whatever else they were going to do, they needed to ensure that Rachel, who had been taken from the party straight to the dungeon, had a change of clothes and other necessities. He thought it would be fastest to have Sofia, who knew Rachel best, make the preparations.

However, Sofia said, “No, that is already taken care of.”

“You’re already prepared? I should have expected no less from you.”

“Yes. The preparations have been made, and her things have already been delivered.”

“I see. You work fast. Huh? Already delivered?”

When he looked at Sofia, who’d just nonchalantly said something he couldn’t possibly ignore, the ashen-haired girl and the two other maids behind her nodded.

“The young mistress discovered in advance that her engagement was to end tonight. That is why, with her direction, we have already prepared the food and necessities that she will need for the next three months and delivered them to the dungeon.”

Unlike Rachel, who could show a surprising amount of expression in private, Sofia wore a steel mask. She delivered shocking facts as if she were merely relating common sense without so much as batting an eyelash.

“Huh?” the duke murmured. All sorts of doubts raced through his mind as he pressed a hand to his forehead. “H-Hold on. She knew in advance? Why would Rachel deliberately refrain from preventing it? And I know it’s only for one person, but how did you carry enough supplies to live on for three months into the castle?”

“She was unsure if he would truly go through with it,” Sofia explained, “but when she learned of his plans to scrap the engagement, the young mistress said, ‘So you’re telling me I can be rid of that idiot in a way that leaves him responsible for it, *and* I get a vacation? Splendid!’”

Sofia’s tone had clearly said, “*Why ask something so obvious?*”

The duke sighed. “Rachel...”

“Also, ever since her engagement to the prince was decided, we, the Black Cats of the Dark Night, have been inserting ourselves in key positions at the palace. As long as we know in advance that an event like this is coming, our forces can easily sneak in supplies under the

guise of their official duties.”

“Rachel, what exactly are you trying to do?!”

The duke was relieved to learn that his daughter was in a more even state of mind than he’d feared. But, at the same time, he shuddered with terror as he realized that his daughter’s darkness ran deeper than he’d ever suspected.

How was there an intelligence organization operating out of his house without his knowing? And how were they so ingrained in the palace that they had free rein to bring in carts full of supplies? That was more than what the spy networks of some nations could manage. If Rachel had taken it this far, it would be easy for her to assassinate one little prince, right?

Thoughts like these raced through the duke’s head. He decided to give up on thinking.

“Anyway, I’ll go to the government office and lodge that complaint,” he said.

“Take care,” Sofia called after him.

05: The Young Lady Chases off the Prince

Rachel was supposed to be confined, yet she was free to do as she pleased. She had brought in her favorite furniture to relax on while she read books, and she was enjoying a leisurely cup of tea.

Elliott, who had been staring at this in disbelief, snapped back to his senses. He shouted at her through the bars, “This is a prison, okay?! What are you relaxing for?!”

“I believe you were the ones who told me that a man’s home is his castle,” Rachel replied.

“This is still a bit much though, isn’t it?! Hey! Do something about this, idiot!”

The guard didn’t know how to respond, but of course he didn’t. He hesitantly said, “I’m not sure what you expect me to do...”

“I didn’t chuck her in prison so she could have a nice vacation! Confiscate all the stuff she’s brought in there!”

Elliott could shout all he wanted, but the reason they’d called him here was because they couldn’t do anything about it.

“About that, Your Highness... The thing is...” the guard muttered. He then explained about the lock.

Elliott’s jaw dropped again. “Wha—? She’s shut herself up in there?”

The guard thought the way the beautiful, sparkling prince just stared at him with vacant eyes was unsettling, or maybe just stupid. “What shall we do?” he asked, having no idea how to proceed.

Elliott wanted to ask the same question. He glanced at Sykes, but

Sykes was just standing there, his mouth agog still. He was being extremely unreliable at the moment.

Her brother's smart, so we should've brought him with us, Elliott thought. However, if he were to call for George now, it would prove his own ineptitude. He angrily scratched his head as he tried to come up with an answer, but even after racking his brains, all he could think of was brute force.

"Break the lock! We can open the cell if we cut the chains!" Elliott bellowed. He kicked Sykes in the rump. "Hey, call some knights in here! Have them bring tools!"

"Huh...? Oh! Yes, sir!" The sound of his footsteps as he clumsily raced up the stairs echoed behind him.

Elliott laughed sneeringly at Rachel. "You may think you've been very clever, but know that this has worsened my opinion of you! I'll soon return you to the state you were meant to be in. You'll not have so much as a blanket left. Quiver in fear as you imagine the miserable conditions that await you!" he declared with a sinister smile. It made him look like nothing more than a petty villain—a fact he was oblivious to.

As the prince's former fiancée glanced over her shoulder at him, the corners of her mouth turned up and she let out a short nasal laugh.

"Oh, wouldn't it be nice if that worked out for you."



Sykes returned with four or five knights in tow. The prince immediately showed them the lock in question.

"This is it," Elliott snarled.

"Urk... We're going to cut that?!" one of the knights cried out. The rest of them looked similarly exasperated, naturally so. The chain the knight was holding was made of steel about a centimeter thick. That wasn't the diameter of the chain, but of the metal itself. Steel rings with a circumference of five or six centimeters made up the chain. If someone were to say it was the chain from the castle gate, you'd probably believe them because of how durable it was. And here it was on the door of a mere jail cell.

The padlock attached to it was likewise massive. Rachel, with her slender frame, probably couldn't even lift it without using both hands. She'd also carefully positioned the keyhole so that it wasn't visible from outside the bars.

"We were told there was a chain that needed cutting, so we brought bolt cutters," one of the knights said, producing a specialized pair of scissors used for cutting iron bolts. They were enormous, and their cutting force was multiplied several times over because of the

leverage in their design. And yet...

"If it were made of lead, we might still be able to cut it, but..."

"You can't cut it?!" Elliott screeched.

"It's made of steel, right? And not cast steel, but tempered steel."

Just to be sure, two of the knights tried cutting it together, but no matter what they did, they couldn't even scratch it.

"It's no use," one of the knights admitted.

Elliott wasn't having that, though. "If the two of you can't do it, then four of you try!"

"Your Highness, just because the steel is twice as thick doesn't mean that doubling the number of people will cut through it."

"It doesn't?! Urgh. Isn't there anything we can do?! Is...there no other way?"

"We did bring a metal saw..."

The saw was designed for cutting metal, and the knights took turns with it.

"Your Highness, we've made a faint scratch."

"Hmm... That's all you could do after thirty minutes, huh?"

At this rate, it would probably take until morning to cut all the way through it. The enormity of the task was starting to dawn on Elliott.

The last knight to use the saw showed the prince its blade. "And look at this. The blade's gone smoother than a bald man's head."

"Is there another saw?" Elliott asked, sounding desperate.

"We could search the castle, but I'm not sure there is..."

Silence fell over the dungeon...until the sound of stifled laughter disrupted it. Elliott turned to see Rachel's shoulders shaking as she read her book.

The pretty boy prince's blood raced to his head, and he kicked the cell bars. "Hey! Just who do you think is at fault for this disturbance?!"

"Why, you, Your Highness. If you hadn't put me in the dungeon, this... 'disturbance'... wouldn't have happened."

"Urgh!"

Elliott's cheeks burned as he felt everyone looking at him. *I'll get her for this!*

When you got down to it, Rachel was right. He'd started this. He had canceled their engagement, condemned her, and thrown her in the dungeon. Still, Elliott was seething, angry that a woman he'd seen as nothing more than an "attractive doll" had humiliated him. He couldn't just walk away.

"Hey! Bring a spear and impale this wretch!" Elliott demanded.

"Y-Your Highness?!"

Sykes, the prison guard, and the knights were all shocked.

Nevertheless, Elliott kept on shouting.

“I’m not telling you to kill her. You just need to injure her enough that she can’t stay cooped up in there. Make her open the lock and come out on her own!”

“I mean, yes, that would work, but...” Sykes trailed off as he and the knights glanced at one another.

It would be hard to claim that the way the prince broke off his engagement and imprisoned his former fiancée followed official procedures. The palace, which included the dungeon, was the property of the king, and Elliott didn’t have the authority to put Rachel in there. It wouldn’t be wrong to say he was misappropriating the dungeon for his own ends. They couldn’t make any decisions until the king, who was traveling for a royal inspection, had returned.

Was it really wise to compound things by injuring the prince’s fiancée when the cancellation of their engagement was still not recognized? She hadn’t committed any crime, aside from bullying the prince’s girlfriend, and that was clearly not a jailable or executable offense. If they were to follow the prince’s orders, they might be punished for it. And they didn’t think the prince would save them if that happened.

As Sykes and the knights stared at one another, silently trying to pass the buck, the prince grew impatient.

“Hey, what’s taking so long?! You just have to stab her a lit...tle...” Elliott stopped midway through his shouting and froze.

Sykes cocked his head. “Hm?”

The others turned to look at the prince, finding it strange that he’d trailed off like that. However, when they saw what Elliott was looking at, they all froze as well.

Rachel was now standing, and she leveled a crossbow at them with impeccable form.

“Y-You brought a weapon in there?!” Elliott hissed. “A weapon...in a prison?! You have no common sense!”

“Whatever are you saying? This is not a weapon.”

“Huh? It’s not?”

“It is a tool for my own self-defense.”

“That’s the same thing, you dolt!”

Rachel’s aim was fixed on Elliott for now, but she was holding it in such a way that she could easily adjust to target any of them. The knights had no ranged weapons of their own to fight back.

As she saw the men stepping back, Rachel smiled sardonically. “Knowing your lack of wit and patience, I was able to see this situation coming. I might add that unlike you, Your Highness—who was too busy chasing girls around town—I had a fondness for hunting with my father and uncle. I’ve shot my fair share of birds in flight, you

know?"

Rachel flashed them a smile that sent chills rushing down their spines.

"It was about three years ago. The village we were staying in was attacked by bandits. Our soldiers put them down immediately, of course, but I helped and shot down three of those animals. In other words, if someone means to do me harm, I will not hesitate to shoot them. Do keep that in mind before you come at me, would you?"

All Sykes and the rest could think was "Oh, crap."

These days, not even the knights saw active combat. So even if they or the soldiers could fight the enemy, they still needed to mentally prepare themselves before landing the final blow. Killing their opponent with a lucky strike was different from knowing for a fact that the strike would kill. There were only a handful of veteran knights who could take down their opposition so easily.

That was the sort of peaceful world they lived in, yet here was a young lady of high nobility who'd tested her mettle in battle. If she were to say, "I will kill you," then it was probably true. Both Elliott and Sykes could sense that.

Rachel cutely cocked her head. "If you're not going to do anything to me, then I will allow you idiots to remain there, watching. However, if you intend to break into the cell and do me harm, I will exercise my right to defend myself. Okay?" Still smiling, she gestured to the stairs with her chin. "Now, if you've no further business here, I'll ask you to leave."

No one there had the presence of mind to realize that the *prisoner* was ordering them around. The knights did as Rachel instructed, dragging Elliott, who was too stunned to move, with them as they left. It looked as though they were protecting their master as they retreated, but they only did it because they couldn't flee as long as a superior officer was there. Incidentally, the prison guard was the first to hightail it out of there.

As Sykes was pushing him up the stairs, Elliott recovered enough to yell, "If you want to be in prison so bad, then you can stay there as long as you like! But I won't be giving you food, or anything else, got it?! I won't let you out even if you ask! Not even if you cry and beg!"

Though her ex-fiancé was spouting vitriol at her, Rachel opened her book again and yawned.

"I do wish you would say that sort of thing to my face."

Rachel wasn't expecting a response. By the time she'd finished saying it, the chickenhearted prince was already long gone.

Rachel fell asleep hugging her book, her thoughts racing to the self-indulgent life that awaited her tomorrow.

06: The Young Lady Hears Something Wonderful

This happened a few weeks before Rachel was thrown in the dungeon.



As he was sweeping the porte cochere in the evening, the gate guard for the ducal house of Ferguson saw a carriage approaching. He called inside, saying, "The young lady has returned!"

The servants hurriedly prepared to welcome her, and the gate guard ran to his post. He just barely opened the gates in time as the carriage bearing the family's crest sped through without slowing. Rachel, the crown prince's fiancée and the future queen of the country, was just now returning from her special lessons at the palace.

The servants, led by the butler and the head maid, stood on both sides of the hall, their heads bowed. Rachel walked along, smiling. When the butler asked how her studies went, she gave him a brief self-assessment, then told the head maid she would take dinner two hours later, as was her usual routine.

Rachel climbed the grand staircase, cheerfully greeting each of the maids and servants who bowed to her, and headed to her room, where she promptly collapsed on the bed.

"Oh... I'm exhausted."

Sofia and her other personal maids wordlessly stripped her out of her clothes, ignoring their mistress's complaints. Her lessons at the palace were apparently quite difficult, as could be seen by the way she always collapsed as soon as she got home. For the next two hours, Rachel's attendants would nurse her back to health, put her in a bath, and make her presentable for dinner with the duke.

It was an impressive trick, being able to render their mistress completely naked while she was still lying face down. But certainly the maids could do it. Ever since Rachel had begun taking lessons at the palace, they had been hard at work polishing their talents in order to support her. They could easily remove her clothes while she was lying down so as to lessen the burden on their mistress. There was no one there to ask perfectly logical questions, like "Couldn't they just strip her while she's standing?" Whatever Rachel chose to do took priority.

Once the maids finished undressing her, they laid a thin sheet over Rachel and stepped back. Sofia came forward and used her index fingers to quickly massage Rachel's entire body from head to foot.

Based on the tension in Rachel's muscles, Sofia asked, "It was four hours of seated lectures, and two of dancing, followed by...table manners, and an inspection of the surrounding area, yes?"

Face still buried in her pillow, Rachel deftly managed to shake her head. “No. It was three hours of seated lectures, two of dancing, one of walking, and two on how to elegantly watch a play—as well as learning the proper manners for a social event attended only by ladies. It all left my shoulders feeling stiff.”

“How does one elegantly watch a play?” Sofia asked.

“You swagger pompously while watching the stage intently with a smile. Or you at least make it look like you are. Those hags made me practice by watching an empty stage while they told me that my posture was bad and that I needed to exude the dignity of a royal. Then they told me my eyes were dead, and to make them sparkle with mirth. Surely no one can be passionate about a stage with no performers.”

“From an outsider’s perspective, that does sound like a silly lesson.”

“From an insider’s perspective, it is silly.”

At Sofia’s signal, another eight maids surrounded Rachel. Then Sofia comforted Rachel, saying, “Oh, you poor dear. Let us do everything we can to soothe your tired body, young mistress.”

“I know I always say this, but do go easy on me...”

“Certainly,” Sofia said, nodding. She looked at the other maids and ordered, “Today I want you to focus on the shoulders, and the area from her shins to the bottom of her feet! She seems quite stiff, so be thorough! Everyone, hop to it!”

“I said go easy on me, didn’t I?! Gaaaaaah!”

Nine maids, including Sofia, descended on Rachel in unison. They massaged and pressed pressure points with the utmost zeal. Their work was professional too. They used not just the tips of their fingers, but the second joints as well, along with acupressure sticks. They worked on her entire body all at once. As the head personal servant, Sofia had the honor of massaging Rachel’s stiffest area, the bottoms of her feet.

“Haugh?! Gwah! Yaaaah! Ow! That huuuurts!”

It was often said that a massage could help you sleep restfully, but this was nothing so tame. It was an absolute assault on Rachel’s body. The maids held her down as she thrashed about in pain, loosening up her muscles with all their might.

“I know I ask this every time,” Rachel interjected, “but why do you have to do my whole body all at once?!”

“And I explain every time that we do not have time to focus on each spot individually. I am sorry, but it has to be this way.”

“You sound like you’re enjoying it an awful lot for someone who’s sorry!”

“One small thrust from me makes my mistress leap in pain. How

could I be anything but amused?" Sofia quipped.

"If you have problems with your work situation, just go on strike, okay?!"

"We do this all for you, young mistress. Oh, my. Your kidneys..."

"Agaaaaaah!"

"You seem quite exhausted," Sofia noted.

"Gaaaah!"

"Hmm, if your yongquan is making you jump this much, then your legs must be quite tense too. Lisa, Mimosa, pay special attention to her chengshan and zusanli."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Stooooop!"



Gently carrying their half-conscious mistress to the bath, they left her to simmer on low heat. Once her snow white skin had turned a nice shade of pink, they scooped her out, wrapped her in a bathrobe, and gave her a gentle massage to relieve any muscle pain from the previous one. Once they gave her a cold glass of lemonade to sip on, Rachel finally came back to her senses.

"Day after day, I attend tiresome lectures on how to act as queen, and then this torment comes along as part of a set. My life is hell. I should never have gotten engaged to the prince."

"But thanks to that, we are able to enjoy ourselves every day," Sofia remarked.

"Blow off your stress from work by shopping or eating, would you?"

"That sort of thing is hard on the wallet, and I would prefer to avoid pastimes that make me gain weight. Besides, do you think there is any entertainment greater than a well-to-do young lady's screams?"

"Yes? There must be lots of things."

As Rachel settled in, watching the maids prepare the clothes and makeup she would wear to dinner, Sofia pulled out a summary of the day's reports for her.

"There are many things to note, but one is of great urgency," Sofia informed her.

"Oh, my. What might that be? Have our routes for passing secret messages through the palace been compromised?" Rachel took a sip of lemonade, cocking her head as Sofia silently handed her the report. "Let's see... 'E is plotting to end his engagement with boss.' Huh?" She paused, sounding dumbfounded. "It even says, 'He is already made the decision and is taking concrete steps toward a plan.'"

As Rachel fell silent and stared at the paper, Sofia explained, "We reported before that the young daughter of a baron has been moving

at the palace recently, and the prince's hangers-on have all become infatuated with her. It seems they have finally resolved to make her queen and are taking steps to remove you from the equation. Unfortunately, young master George is one of them. As proof, he participated in their meeting, yet he has made no mention of it to the house."

Having finished her explanation, Sofia lowered her voice and asked, "What shall we do?"

If Rachel were to move those who were loyal to her, it would be simple to crush the prince's plans, or even the prince himself. The agents that she'd trained held enough power to do so.

"Well..." Rachel returned the paper to Sofia. "I think we need to use more code words. It's blatantly obvious who the boss is in this message, isn't it?"

"I am terribly sorry. When we created our code, we obviously had not anticipated a situation such as this." Sofia put the report in her pocket, looked at her mistress with upturned eyes, and asked, "So, what do we do?"

"Hmm. It's certainly an unexpected development..."

As Rachel fell silent, glaring at the air in front of her, Sofia continued to watch her quietly.

Prince Elliott, the man Sophia's young mistress was to marry, was attractive and popular, especially with the young girls. But there were a number of unpleasant rumors about him. If he had a dark history, that would be one thing, but he merely was prone to incredible blunders.

That would not do.

Obviously, it was fortunate that he had good looks, but if what was behind that exterior could not measure up to Rachel's prodigious wit, their married life would quickly deteriorate. It wasn't uncommon for petty nobles to be in a loveless marriage maintained only for appearances, but if the couple in question were the future king and queen of the country... Well, you didn't have to be one of Rachel's servants to see the danger there.

If he were a simpleton who would do everything Rachel told him, things would still be manageable, but Elliott's incompetence was unacceptable. People said that, despite his ineptness, he was exceptionally prideful. If Rachel were to tell him to do this or that, he was bound to get indignant and oppose her on everything even though he had no talent. In fact, from what Rachel—and her agents who'd infiltrated the palace—had told her, the slovenly prince did not get along with Rachel because of her irreproachable conduct. When Rachel told him to get his act together, he would get annoyed and

refuse to listen to a word she said.

To think a mere prince would defy the young mistress...

Sofia felt a murderous rage for this impertinent royal who really ought to have known his place. As soon as Rachel gave her permission, she planned to tear that stupid, talentless, cheating, senseless, garbage prince limb from limb.

Sofia, by the way, had never met Elliott. Her estimate of his worth was completely based on rumors. While she tried to be impartial, when something was to the disadvantage of her young mistress, Sofia tended to lose her head—but only *just a little*. She thought it was a *cute* foible of hers.



Rachel sat her empty glass down and turned to face Sofia.

“So, what precisely do they intend to do?”

“They plan to condemn you at the party next month that opens the season of social events. And, after declaring your engagement null and void, the baroness’s daughter will take your place.”

“That makes sense,” Rachel mused. “Only the young nobles will be there. He won’t have to worry about our parents or influential politicians stepping in to stop him. This must have been George’s idea.”

“You could tell?”

Rachel shrugged. “Prince Elliott would just come tell me after he made up his mind, never bothering to lay the groundwork.”

“He is quite the idiot,” Sofia commented.

“They do say that all of his genes went exclusively to his good looks, leaving none for his brain. Anyway, both the king and queen will be away performing an inspection of the southern mining region and holding a top-level conference with the leaders of a principality. The timing was well chosen, at least for something George came up with.”

“Could there be another schemer...?”

“His Highness’s other hangers-on include one man with muscles for brains who is only interested in counting calories, and seven or eight yes-men who I’ve never been able to tell apart.”

“Even if you were not involved, that lineup would still leave one concerned for the kingdom’s future.”

“That must be why His Majesty didn’t want him to assume power.”

As Rachel rose from the sofa, she let her bathrobe fall to the ground. The maids saw her skin was no longer flushed and began dressing her in fresh clothes.

“Now, Sofia, if I am condemned at this party and the baron’s

young daughter takes my place as the prince's fiancée...what does His Highness intend to do with me after that? He's planning to excoriate me in public, so he won't have me knifed when no one is around, right?"

"These children think their plan is going to work, so I doubt they have thought it through that far. They intend to force you to admit to bullying the baron's daughter and apologize. Then, when His Majesty returns, they will drag you before him and have you confess your crimes so that the change of fiancées goes smoothly. That seems to be their plan."

"Sloughing off the responsibility of dealing with me to my father and His Majesty. Wait, so they haven't thought that far ahead?"

"Precisely," Sofia confirmed.

Rachel, now dressed in a simple dress for wearing around the house, sat down on a stool. The maids responsible for her makeup draped a scarf around her neck and began powdering her face. Rachel preferred light makeup, so they only used a little. They soon traded the powder puffs for brushes and began applying lipstick.

"There's about a week between the party and His Majesty's return, right?" Rachel asked. "Hasn't it occurred to them that even if I were to meekly apologize, I might recant once I returned home?"

"I cannot imagine you ever so meekly apologizing, young mistress. But...they must be assuming that if they make a big enough show of denouncing you in front of everyone at the party, there will be no way to overturn that fact."

"You can't imagine it? I'll have you know I'm famous at court for being a meek and modest young lady."

"A wolf is a wolf even if it does not howl. I can only laugh at how dim all the members of polite society are. Ha ha ha ha ha."

Recalling one piece of information she had thus far neglected to tell her mistress—who seemed upset for some reason—Sofia reported, "Oh, right. In the event you defiantly refuse to admit your crimes, they intend to throw you in the dungeon until you come crying to them."

Rachel stared blankly at her. "The dungeon...?"

"Yes. They intend to confine you in the dungeon."

"There's one of those in the palace?"

Rachel's surprise was understandable. Something so dark as a palace dungeon seemed out of place in this easygoing, peaceful kingdom. It wasn't as though nobles never committed crimes, but you never heard of them being imprisoned inside the palace.

"I confirmed it for myself after receiving this information. The building facing the rear garden, which is used for storage as well as emergency lodging for courtiers, contains a prison that is half

underground. It seems to have been built by the king seven generations ago so that he could torment traitors.”

It was a relic from the days of bloody strife at court. In other words...

“That means it’s from about a century ago, right? Is it still usable?” Rachel asked.

“The room has nothing but stone walls and iron bars. All of the interior has been removed, but it seems the running water has been maintained. Or rather, it just works on its own still. On very rare occasions, an official will come around to check the facilities.”

At this point, the man in charge of patrolling the area must still have been enjoying a happy, ordinary life.

“They can’t have many people to put in there,” Rachel noted. “I suppose they must have a lot of extra space in the castle.”

Looking at the report Sofia had given her, Rachel was shocked by the size of the dungeon sketched there. If the dimensions were to be believed, the two rooms together were about the size of a tennis court.

“The dungeon was intended for imprisoning important members of the nobility,” Sofia explained, “so perhaps they were generous in their estimates of required living space?”

“Perhaps the walls and pillars were built to conform with the shape of the floors above.”

It wasn’t clear what had caught Rachel’s attention, but she began pacing as she stared at the paper. The maid in charge of accessories followed behind her, trying to get the necklace around her neck.

Rachel stopped. The maid hurriedly put her jewelry on.

“Sofia, the party in question is three weeks from now, right?”

“Yes, that is correct?” Sofia cocked her head. She was sure that Rachel was about to crush the garbage prince’s plans, so what did this have to do with the dungeon?

“Could you show me the report on the goods the Black Cat Company is dealing in?”

“Huh? Yes, young mistress.”

Sofia was becoming less and less sure of what her mistress was talking about.

The Black Cat Company was a front for the Black Cats of the Night, a group of operatives that Rachel maintained for herself—separate from those of the ducal house. Using the business of domestic and foreign trade as a cover, the Black Cat Company raised funds for their activities and maintained contact with an intelligence network that operated everywhere. Of course, even if the company was a front, Rachel had built the organization. They handled their business properly.

Rachel looked through the list of recent products, stopping to

carefully peruse some pages. She normally kept her expression to a careful facade, but she broke out into a genuine grin as she said, "This is good..."

"Huh? What is...?"

"Sofia."

"Yes, young mistress."

"If my engagement ends at the party, then I'll no longer be the next queen, correct?"

"Yes, that is true, but... I cannot see His Majesty accepting it. I have never met the man myself, but surely he cannot be as stupid as his son."

That was some serious lèse-majesté there, Ms. Sofia, Rachel thought. Not that she minded.

"That's not a problem," Rachel replied. "He won't be at the party, after all."

No, there wouldn't be anyone there to stop Prince Elliott.

"When he breaks off our engagement at the party, I'll deny his accusations."

Sofia nodded. "Right..."

"Then I'll get him to chuck me in the dungeon."

"You will 'get him to'...?"

Rachel held up the manifest of goods and proudly declared, "I'm going on an indefinite vacation!"

Sofia and the maids were always in perfect sync with Rachel, but every last one of them froze. Sofia was the first to regain her senses enough to speak.

"Young mistress, I am not sure what you mean by that."

"Oh, my, Sofia. If even you don't understand, then nobody can."

"Yes, of that you can be certain."

Rachel gleefully flicked the list with her finger. "Once my engagement to His Highness is over, I'll no longer be his fiancée. Do you follow me so far?"

"Yes."

Sofia and the other maids nodded, so Rachel continued.

"That means I'll no longer be the next queen. So I'll no longer be required to take the lessons to become one."

"Yes, I suppose so," Sofia agreed.

"As a result, I will have free time."

"That does follow, yes."

The maids looked at one another, sensing something ominous.

"So! I think I'll use all the time I didn't have thanks to those lessons to take it easy and indulge in my hobbies!"

"I understand your reasoning now," Sofia acknowledged.

"What do you mean, my 'reasoning'?" Rachel asked, puffing out

her cheeks.

On behalf of the maids, Sofia started working through Rachel's logic.

"I understand that you want to use the free time generated by your broken engagement to take a vacation."

"Yes," Rachel confirmed.

"However, I do not see the connection between that and the dungeon. Could you not just go along with things, then hurry back to the mansion and leave for somewhere more picturesque?"

"Now, Sofia, that just won't do." Rachel lightly poked Sofia on the forehead, like you might do to a child who got a failing grade. "If I don't put everything into my escape attempt, those disgusting old hags will drag me back here in no time."

Sofia, who had been speechless, now recovered. "In short, your goal is to use imprisonment as an excuse to escape from Duchess Somerset and your other tutors' lessons, then?"

"Yep!!!" Rachel raised both arms in the air and spun around. She seemed absolutely delighted. "Isn't it great? Not only will my engagement to that ignoramus be canceled—and he'll be the one responsible for it—but I also get to escape Duchess Somerset and the hags for a vacation where I don't have to do anything! It's wonderful!"

Sadly for Rachel, who was quite happy with her plan, there was a hole in it.

Sofia shook her head. "Young mistress, when His Majesty returns, that garbage prince's nonsense will all be swept away. But even before that, there is no way that a good-for-nothing like His Majesty could possibly stand up to Duchess Somerset and the other ladies of the court, is there?"

"Sofia, you really shouldn't talk about His Majesty like that in public, okay?" Rachel chided.

Ignoring that shot from Rachel, Sofia continued, "What I am saying is that even if you are thrown in prison, they will haul you back out the next day."

This did nothing to change Rachel's smile. "Well, I'll just have to be sure that they can't haul me out, then."

"Come again?!"

There was no uncertainty in Rachel's eyes as she explained, "I just have to lock the prison from the inside."

"From the inside?"

"That's right."

Was it even a prison anymore if the lock was on the inside?

"Now that that's settled, it's time to prepare for a fun vacation!"

"A fun...vacation...?" Sofia muttered.

It seemed that Rachel had a different idea of what prison was like

than most people.

“Now, if we assume I’ll be in there for longer, say three months, I’ll need preserved foods and other things to last me that long. There’s a lot of different types of canned goods now, you know? Let’s have the Black Cat Company find me some good stuff! We’ll prepare in advance by bringing things in little by little so as not to alert the prison guard, and we’ll clean up the cell. We’ll need to research ways to keep in contact and evade palace security too! It’s indoors, so I won’t need a tent, but what should I do for bedding? Oh, there’s so little time, and so much to get ready!”



Rachel's heart raced with excitement as if she were preparing for a camping trip. Sofia and the other maids looked at one another, seeing how much fun their mistress was having. But when they realized Rachel was serious, they all bowed their heads in unison.

"Understood," Sofia stated.

For Sofia and the other maids, Rachel always came first. As far as they were concerned, whatever the young mistress decided, even if it was out of step with the world around her, was right. If she was running away from the harsh reality of her lessons as future queen, then so long as she was enjoying herself, that was good enough for them.

"In that case, young mistress, as the dungeon is underground, we will need to prepare a large number of lights and some insect repellant."

"I also think you should bring more than the minimum amount of food. You'll want sweets and tea too, won't you?"

"If you can't walk around, then you should bring along novels and collections of poetry."

"Oh, my. You're all getting into this too!" Rachel exclaimed.

Not one of them tried to stop Rachel as her fun vacation plan got underway.



In the dining hall...

"Hey, what's taking Rachel so long?" the duke asked. "It's already been four hours since she came home."

"She said it would be two hours..."

"I'm hungry," the duke grumbled.

Chapter 2: An Exciting New Life

07: The Young Lady Enjoys Gourmet Delicacies

Elliott was true to his word; he did not arrange for food to be taken to Rachel.

Part of the reason he didn't was that he was frustrated she'd threatened him with a weapon when he thought he had the upper hand. But getting revenge for that wasn't his main goal. He'd decided to make this a war of attrition. He thought that if Rachel were weakened by hunger, she would submit and bow to him. So instead of giving her the food, the prison guard would eat her meals in front of her. The plan was to agitate her hunger by spitefully eating every dish and acting like it was delicious.

No matter how composed Rachel seemed, she must have expected to be fed. But now, just as she thought she'd won, she'd be hit with the terror of starvation. Elliott was confident that would teach her a lesson.



The prison guard was sitting at a table in front of the cell bars, displaying each item of food he'd brought before eating it.

"Oh, goodness me! This black bread you nobles get to eat sure does taste different! It's smooth on the tongue, and still so fresh that it doesn't have that sour smell either! It's so good!"

The menu was pretty awful, and the guard was rather monotone as he explained it—he'd never cut it as a food critic. It didn't look appetizing in the least, more like it was just marginally better than the horrible slop he was used to getting. Still, it seemed to be having an effect on the young lady in the cell, because she groaned in hunger.

"I'm glad I brought oatmeal," Rachel stated, "but it just doesn't taste as good with powdered milk. The raisins do help it somewhat, though."

"This is chicken breast broiled in sauce!" the guard countered. "Even cold as it is, the flavor has seeped in quite well, yes it has. Oh, my, to think they give this to prisoners. That seems a bit *too* generous."

"As for my roast duck, while the flavor seeped in nicely, it has been sitting in its sauces so long that the meat has gone hard. Well,

canned goods have their limits, I suppose.”

“And it comes with dessert! What a bold move! Oh, yes, the slightly sour taste of this orange is too good to describe!”

“These peaches in syrup are quite good. They’re not like fresh ones, but they do have an excessive sweetness that makes them different altogether.”

Rachel, who’d been eating her canned goods at a collapsible round table, smiled as she met eyes with the guard. He was watching her silently now.

“I knew it. Preserved food just doesn’t taste as good. You seem to have enjoyed your meal, Mr. Guard, so I’m a touch jealous.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Take that! If you’re jealous, then hurry up and apologize to the prince! Oh... Goddammit!” The guard kicked his table over, and the metal platter and dishes clattered to the stone floor. With tears in his eyes, he shouted, “Don’t say that when you don’t mean it!”

“Oh, my. You were trying so hard to make that food look delicious that I was simply trying to be courteous by playing along.”

“This is the problem with you nobles! You’re good at rubbing people the wrong way, if nothing else, huh?!”

“Do you know what the lunch menu will be, Mr. Guard? I’ll need to pick out something to match yours.”

“Don’t bother! If the harassment isn’t working, why not just say so?! There’s no need to harass me back!”

“Heavens no! As a member of the nobility, I must fight on equal terms.”

“Don’t drag me into the sort of fight where you pretend to be competing fair and square, and then kick me under the table...”

“Is that not your job?”

The guard was getting frustrated; nothing he said seemed to get under her skin. He angrily jabbed a finger at her and yelled, “Listen up! Don’t think you’ll get off this easy, okay?!”

“Oh, how scary.”

“The preserves you brought with you will run out eventually! Don’t expect the prince to give you the time of day if you wait until then to bow your head and apologize!”

Even as he shouted this, the prison guard’s eyes were drawn to the mountains of wooden boxes piled high inside the prison.

Just how many months’ worth does she have?



Once the guard gave his report to the prince, the mealtime show-and-tell was canceled.

“Dammit! Dammit! Dammmiiiit!” the beautiful prince bellowed in

the sort of shameful display that no one should ever see.

Wishing they could be anywhere else, Sykes, the son of the commander of the knights, and George, the eldest son of the duke, silently watched as this awkward scene unfolded. There were a few servants there as well, standing by the wall and hoping to go unnoticed.

No matter how you cut it, Rachel seemed to have the upper hand.

Prince Elliott was throwing a tantrum right now because he couldn't keep up with Rachel's unbelievable reactions. He fully believed in his own competence, but Rachel was striking him left and right with countermoves he'd never expected. If she had gone on a hunger strike, that would be one thing, but to think she had such reserves that attempting to starve her out was utterly ineffective. It defied all common sense.

"Damn that Rachel! Not only is she not crying from hunger, she's spiced her meals with revenge!"

"The guard says she has the leeway to match her menu to his," Sykes admitted.

"Can't you shut off her water?!" Prince Elliott protested. "Surely she won't act so flippantly if she has no water!"

"We would need to destroy the plumbing to do that. And if something went wrong, we could end up cutting the water to half the palace."

"Damn it all!" the prince raged. He had a low tolerance for being countered right off the bat.

"What will you do?" Sykes asked.

"I don't care anymore!" Elliott spat. "Just patrol once in a while! If we give her too much attention, it will only entertain her!"

The prince is thinking for once, George thought...but he didn't dare say it out loud.

Elliott turned to George, a vein bulging on his temple. "Can't you keep the House of Ferguson under control, George?!"

George flinched as the prince's misdirected ire came his way. He'd predicted it would, of course, after how badly his sister had vexed the prince.

"There's nothing I can do about the supplies she's already brought in there. Still, no matter what father says, I won't allow our house to render her any more assistance."

"Good. The reason Rachel was able to prepare so much in advance is because your family has so much money and manpower. When she learns they've turned against her with you in control, it will break her spirit. Get it done."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

Neither of them suspected that Rachel had done everything using

her own pawns, without relying on her house in the slightest.

There was one more thing that neither Elliott nor George would have imagined: the duke and duchess had already given up on their eldest son.



Some days later, as the prison guard was patrolling in the afternoon, Rachel surprisingly called out to him from inside her cell.

“Mr. Guard...”

“Oh? What? Has your head cooled a little?”

“I think His Highness is the one who needs to cool his head.”

“What?”

The guard looked at Rachel, who seemed unaffected by everything. She opened a can of something that smelled sweet and ate a spoonful—her dessert, apparently.

“Weren’t you going to take three meals a day here, Mr. Guard?” she inquired.

“Oh, that. That’s been canceled. It wasn’t hurting you, and it’s just making us seem like fools.”

“See, that’s just the thing.” Rachel adorably cocked her head, a troubled look on her face. “None of this tastes quite so good without company.”

“Oho, that’s a cute thing to say, given how cheeky you are otherwise.”

“I’ve realized that when I can’t see you howling in agony, I’m not able to savor it all with the taste of victory.”

“Shut up! Just read your books or whatever!”

“Yes, that’s the stuff!”

“Would you stop talking?!”

08: The Young Lady Idles the Day Away

“Ungh...”

Rachel woke with the morning sun shining on her face. Sitting up on her comfy cushioned sofa—that could have dragged even a sage down into a life of sloth—she rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. She wasn’t proud of it, but she wasn’t exactly a morning person. Plus, she’d been so engrossed in her novel that she’d been unable to resist staying up late the night before.

“This is no good. I can’t get up.”

It wasn’t as though she had anything she needed to do, so Rachel lay back down on the sofa, turned toward the shade, and was soon sleeping soundly once more.



Elliott awoke to someone tearing the covers off him.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” he yelled at the culprit. He looked up to see Sykes standing there, holding the blanket and looking ashamed.

“Your Highness, it’s past time you should be awake,” Sykes informed him.

“Still, wasn’t that a little sudden?! There must be a better way!”

“Well, you see...”

Elliott followed Sykes’s gaze and saw the head maid and several other maids standing by.

“Oh...” Elliott realized the maids had forced their way past Sykes. If he were to ignore them, he’d face the shrill voice of the head maid, and the maids would clean the area immediately around him just to harass him.

Once Elliott understood that going back to sleep wasn’t an option, he sluggishly crawled out of bed.



Having slept until almost noon, Rachel put on a pot of tea to replenish her fluids and then started digging through a number of boxes.

“What shall I have for brunch today?”

As she looked at the cans, sorted by type, Rachel mumbled things like, “I had fish yesterday,” as she weighed her options. Well, it wasn’t as though there were that many varieties. She didn’t eat much in prison, maybe due to the lack of exercise, so she was very careful about her menu. Basically, she had too much time on her hands, so she agonized over her choices too much.

“It’s interesting, choosing a menu for myself,” Rachel remarked—not that she had to make any of the food.



Elliott had done a lot of running around the day before, so he was being monitored closely today during work.

“Hey, isn’t it a bit much, following me to the bathroom like this?” Elliott complained.

The stern-faced bureaucrat shook his head. “You told us yesterday you were ‘going to the bathroom,’ and then you took off on us and didn’t return to your room until nighttime.”

“Well, uh, yes, you see... The toilets were all occupied, so I had to go looking.”

“Your own personal toilet was occupied, Your Highness?”

When Elliott returned from the bathroom, officials from every department were guarding the doors and windows, documents in hand.

“Come now, Your Highness, you’re already behind on the approvals you need to sign this morning. There’s no time for you to take lunch in the dining hall, so I’ve brought sandwiches.”

“You want me to work without breaks?!”

“You took enough of a break yesterday, didn’t you?”



Rachel had tired of reading, so she moved on to knitting.

“Hmm, I’m happy to knit...but what should I make?”

Rachel had a wide array of skills, but no idea what she wanted to do.

“Now that I think of it, is this really the season to be making things with wool?”

She came to this shocking realization only after getting everything ready.

“Well, on that note, I think I’ll knit George a muffler.”



Elliott was buried beneath a mountain of paperwork.

“Your Highness, have you been making any progress?” George asked hesitantly.

Elliott let out an exasperated groan. “I have no idea. How much of this is even finished?”

Turning to the secretary seated beside him, who had been handing him document after document, Elliott asked, “Hey, how much longer is this going to take?”

The bureaucrat adjusted his glasses and, without any change in expression, said, “Your Highness, please save that question for until after we’ve reached the halfway point.”



Rachel laid down her knitting needles and narrowed her eyes happily. “I love how comfy this all feels,” she muttered, enjoying the afternoon light and the gentle breeze.

This was no time to be knitting, though.

“Why, this is the perfect weather for an afternoon nap!”

Just as she’d finished arranging the cushions and was about to throw a blanket over herself, it hit her.

“Hold on a second... Wouldn’t a nightcap before an afternoon nap

be the best thing ever?!" She hurriedly opened a box and uncorked a bottle of plum wine. "I'll have just a little... Yes, just a little."

Rachel poured herself a rather large glass. Lifting it up with evident satisfaction, she gently sipped the pink liquid, savoring the taste of the sweet and mellow alcohol.



Fed up with this never-ending desk work, Elliott threw a tantrum and headed outside.

"Honestly, staying cooped up inside, doing paperwork, on a fine day like this? What are those bureaucrats thinking?"

Elliott continued to grumble as he walked into the yard. Behind him, George and Sykes looked at each other.

"You say that, but the weather doesn't affect desk work," George noted.

"Us knights are often forced to work in bad weather too," Sykes added.

"You fools! That reasoning applies to adults! I'm still just a minor, in the learning stages, remember? The curriculum should reflect that."

"Well, sure..." Sykes agreed.

"Keeping a minor locked up like that," Elliott continued, "is against the child labor laws!"

"Child...?" George wondered aloud.

Ignoring his unconvinced attendants for the moment, Elliott tried to shift gears and think about what to do after this.

"Now, I think I'll kill some time with a stroll through the garden."

Maybe Margaret will arrive at just the right time, Elliott thought, heading into the garden, but he ran into her polar opposite. A bunch of sweaty men were waiting for him—the commander of the knights' second-in-command along with some knights in training gear.

"We've been waiting for you," the second-in-command said.

"Now, off to the training grounds we go!"

"Huh? What are you people talking about?" Elliott asked. He failed to make heads or tails of the situation.

Sykes puffed up his chest and proudly explained, "You were saying you couldn't bear to stay cooped up inside on a fine day like this, so I arranged for you to join the knights' fencing practice!"

"That's why the bureaucrats let me go so easily?! No, listen, this isn't what I meant!"

The second-in-command commended him, saying, "It's admirable of you to volunteer to train with us on your own initiative, Your Highness!"

"Come along," another knight said encouragingly. "We've already got everything ready for you!"

“No, hold on,” Elliott protested, but the muscles-for-brains knights dragged him off.



When Rachel woke from her nap, which no one had complained or nagged her about, the lingering red of the setting sun was just vanishing. She hurriedly lit her lamp, bringing light back to the room before total darkness could swallow it.

“I slept too much...”

Even Rachel had to reflect on her actions a bit.

“If my sleep had been just a little deeper, I could have slept on through until morning.”

Okay, no, scratch that. She hadn’t learned a thing.

“Well, what’s done is done. I think I’ll have some dinner.”

After a little thought, Rachel pulled out an especially large can. Tonight’s main course was white fish boiled in garlic oil. She opened the can and got her alcohol lamp ready. Then she skillfully—by the standards of well-to-do young ladies, at least—peeled some of the potatoes she’d brought in here and sliced them thinly. Removing the fish from its can, she laid the potatoes on the bottom and then put the fish back on top.

“Hee hee, my cooking has improved quite a lot! When I do it this way, the potatoes suck up the oil and taste even better! Ah, if only I could share this, the discovery of the millennium, with all mankind.”

No, mankind did not need this sheltered young lady to teach them. It was already a widely known technique. Rachel, however, didn’t know that.

Rachel checked occasionally to see how the can was boiling and hummed to herself as she picked out a wine that would pair well with today’s meal. Once the food was finished cooking, she blew daintily on the hot fish and potatoes and then carried them to her mouth. It tasted just as she had hoped. “Mmm!” she exclaimed as she writhed in wordless ecstasy.

“Oh, to think I’ve learned to prepare such a dish for myself. I’m making such rapid progress. This solo prison life really was the right choice.”

With the savory flavor of the food still in her mouth, she took a quick swig of white wine.

“Washing down the fish and garlic with a clean white wine is incredible!”

Rachel seemed satisfied with her own cooking. She was only able to pick her own menu and cook—was it really cooking?—because she was living alone here in the prison. She almost wanted to thank that moronic prince for putting her in here.

Rachel pressed her index fingers into her snow-white cheeks, which were now a little flushed, and let out a relaxed sigh. “Good food, good drink, and a cushioned bed to fall right back on as soon as the alcohol hits! It’s perfect!”

She enjoyed her feast as she rapidly progressed to indulgence.



They weren’t so cruel as to make Elliott work while eating dinner too. A small dining hall—which, despite being called a hall, only had one table that could seat around ten people—had been prepared for him near his room.

Elliott’s whole body ached as he stumbled to the head of the table. “Today was a disaster...” he complained, sounding disheartened.

“You made relatively decent progress on stamping all those documents. Good work, Your Highness,” George said, trying to cheer him up.

Sykes attempted to do the same, saying, “The vice-commander said you put in a reasonable effort, Your Highness!”

“Oh, I see...” Elliott picked up his spoon as the first dish, a potage with green peas, was served. “They wouldn’t say that I did well, then,” he mumbled.

His two associates couldn’t tell a lie, so they awkwardly said nothing. The table fell silent, with only the sound of Elliott slurping echoing soullessly through the room.

“Oh, but,” Elliott said, looking up as he finished his soup, “I want to see Margaret! When I’m feeling down like this, her inexhaustible cheer is just the thing I need! George, won’t Margaret be coming today?!”

The sun had almost set. What did the prince think he was saying? George and Sykes looked at each other in surprise as Elliott began loudly pining for the girl he loved “so much that he wanted to tear his hair out.”

“Your Highness, what are you talking about?” George questioned.

“He must be exhausted from doing all these things he’s not used to,” Sykes suggested.

“What is that reaction for, you two?”

George and Sykes exchanged another glance. Not only was it already evening, but there was another reason they were confused.

“I mean, you do know...” George began.

“Right?” Sykes finished.

“Know what?!”

George adjusted his glasses with his middle finger, a dubious expression on his face. “Margaret is away today and tomorrow on a family trip. You were just saying yesterday how you missed her so

much you could die, remember?"

"Mom's been saying she wants to see it, so we're going to the waterfall in Coldwall! Hee hee, I'll be sure to bring back souvenirs for you too, Your Highness!"

That was what the smiling red-headed girl with pigtails had told him.

"You were just telling us that yesterday, weren't you?!" Sykes insisted.

"What are you talking about now?!" George pressed.

Elliott dropped his knife and fork. "It's no good. I don't think I can go on living anymore. If I don't have Margaret's smile right now, I'm going to die."

"After just two days of not seeing her?!" George exclaimed. "You're acting far too addicted to her, Your Highness!"

"Hey, Your Highness? Is this going to drag on? You mind if I go ahead and eat?" Sykes asked.

"I haven't seen her in two whole days, okay?! It feels like two years to me!"

"Even if it feels like two years, it's only actually been two days! You'll be just fine when you see her again the day after tomorrow!" George declared.

When George tried to correct him, Elliott got even more out of hand. "The day after tomorrow?! I can't see her until the day after tomorrow? The bureaucrats will have murdered me with paperwork by then!"

George sighed and said, "Let me be clear. His Majesty and the other royals do this much every single day!"

"Margareeeet!"

"His Highness is having a breakdown?! Hey, Sykes, would you stop stuffing your face and help me hold him down?!"

"Can I finish eating first?"

"Now!"

This idiocy continued until the chief lady-in-waiting appeared to shout at them.



Rachel closed her book, satisfied with its twist ending.

"So that's where it goes, huh? Yes, I'm definitely glad I read to the end. I was very close to a poor night's sleep as I fretted about how they were going to wrap things up."

Rachel lowered the light on her lamp. The book's wonderful ending made her feel euphoric.

"It really is nice, being able to read late into the night without the head maid yelling at me for it. If I'm still tired when I wake up

tomorrow morning, I think I'll sleep in until noon again."

It wasn't like Rachel never wanted to stroll through the gardens again. But wasn't it also good for her to appreciate this time when she could read to her heart's content, enjoy tea whenever she liked, and try her hand at some chores when the mood took her?

To be completely frank, well-to-do young ladies like her went everywhere by carriage. There was no need for her to exercise in the first place. Besides, she'd already been a shut-in in the making who rarely strolled through the gardens at her own house. She was a selfish girl who basically always wanted to put her own convenience first. So as long as she was able to change her own clothes, she didn't feel at all inconvenienced by being confined to a single room.

"My royal lessons were too painful to bear, but if I think of them as a prelude to this ideal slow life, maybe they weren't so bad."

As she enjoyed the arcadian days she'd won for herself after so much suffering, Rachel went to sleep thinking that, yes, life was better behind bars and that she'd been right to let them throw her in here.



After he was forced into his bedroom, Elliott quietly opened his window. A cool wind blew in from the dark courtyard, brushing his cheeks.

"Okay..."

As he was searching for his outdoor shoes, one of the knights on guard called out to him from outside.

"Your Highness."

"What?"

"The knights have all heard that young miss Poisson is away traveling and that Your Highness is exhibiting symptoms of withdrawal. We'll be keeping a close watch on the horses and carriages, making sure they don't sneak off, okay?"

"I see... Keep up the good work, then."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Elliott closed the window, shut the curtains, and crawled into bed.

09: The Prince Learns What the Young Lady is Thinking

Taking the rattling kettle from the flame, Rachel quickly poured the hot water into a teapot already prepared with the tea leaves inside. Then she turned over a sand timer, covered the pot with a tea cozy, and looked at the wooden boxes.

"To have cookies, or to have dried cake? That is the question."

Rachel touched her bottom lip as she pondered, and as she did...Prince Elliott's cold eyes stabbed daggers into the side of her

attractive face.

“Rachel, is that really the problem here?!” Elliott snapped.

“Oh, my, Your Highness! The tea is already steeping. Is there any problem I could possibly prioritize more?”

Elliott had come to the prison for the first time in several days to see if Rachel had cooled her head a little, but he was greeted by the sight of her elegantly preparing for tea time.

She clearly hasn't learned her lesson, he thought.

“Surely you're not about to tell me there isn't?” Elliott scoffed.

Rachel had to think about that. After some quiet reflection, she clapped her hands. “Oh! Like how I haven't chosen a cup yet?”

“You think I'm concerned by a trivial thing like that?”

“Oh, goodness me. The sand timer ran out as I was thinking.”

“Don't lose interest in your prince's questions! Listen to me, would you?!”

Ignoring the prince as he shouted angrily, Rachel smiled at the fragrance tickling her nostrils and popped a tea cake in her mouth. The brandy cake filled with dried fruit was delightful, and she washed it down with another sip of tea.

“Yes, I do believe the Lion restaurant's ‘Nuts & Berries’ go perfectly with tea. This was the perfect choice.”

Elliott's rage was seething as hot as magma. “Hey, if you're satisfied, then look this way. Just how long do you intend to ignore your prince?”

Rachel looked blankly at him, her fork still in her mouth. Once she'd swallowed her bite of cake, she arched her beautiful eyebrows and, leveling her fork at Elliott, said, “Your Highness. You can't get by as a prince if you let one of your retainers look down on you! You have to tell off those who misbehave harder! Do you understand? Promise your big sister you will, okay?” She finished with a smug look, turned as if done with him, and poured herself a second cup.

“Huh?!” Elliott choked out. Her off-the-wall response had dumbfounded him, and when he came back to his senses, a vein popped up on his forehead and he ground his teeth. “That's some impressive sleep-addled nonsense from the very person who's been looking down on and belittling me, huh?!”

Rachel, who was never short of a retort, said, “Well, I never! I'm quite awake. I think the one who sounds like they're talking in their sleep despite being awake is you, Your Highness.”

“Enough of this, you wretch! Not only did you bully Margaret from the shadows, but now that I've thrown you in prison, you still refuse to repent. And you even mock me?!”

“See, that's just it! Honestly, why should I have to point out your every flaw while I'm behind bars?! You're putting a burden on your

prisoner, you sad excuse for a prince. Now, have I made myself understood? You need to comport yourself in a manner more befitting of a prince, and pay more attention to those around you, okay?!"

"Huh?! S-Sorry... Wait, what?"

There's something wrong with Rachel's reasoning...

It was only around the time Rachel had finished her third cup that it finally dawned on Elliott that she was toying with him.

"Argh! What do I care if you're feeling inconvenienced now?!"

"Bit slow with the response there, weren't you?" Rachel remarked.

"Shut up! We're talking about you here! Has your head cooled any since I had you thrown in there?!" Elliott shouted, jabbing a finger in Rachel's direction. "How about it? A well-to-do young lady from a good family like yourself can't possibly stand living in this dark, chilly dungeon! It's been ten days now. No matter how much you were able to prepare, it's still only a temporary residence. You can put up a strong front, but deep down, you're about ready to say uncle, aren't you?!"

Having apparently had enough tea, Rachel sank into the cushioned sofa that could have ruined a sage, opened up a magazine, and began reading. The cover indicated it was a collection of illustrated stories that had been popular recently. She blatantly ignored Elliott, not even deigning to respond. It was a little too dark to read, so she pulled the lamp on the table a little closer.

"Hey!" Elliott yelled.

"You have no composure whatsoever," Rachel responded. "Did your educators never tell you it's impolite to make such a ruckus next to someone who's reading?"

"Did no one ever tell *you* not to do other things when you're listening to someone?!"

"Oh, that's quite all right. I wasn't listening to you to begin with."

"Then fix that!"

Rachel glanced at Elliott, her magazine still open. "Your Highness, do I look like I'm about to give up this lifestyle?"

Elliott took another look around the prison. There was a thick rug with geometrical patterns on it that blocked out the cold of the stone floor; a cushioned sofa that he would have liked to try out but, as a prince, couldn't put in his own living room; high-quality tea and teacakes; a lamp that, despite regular use, seemed unlikely to run out any time soon; and a collection of canned goods that gave her the chance to eat a number of foreign delicacies. If she could put up with the fact that she couldn't go outside, and the fact that the decor was a little bland, she had a better lifestyle here than some minor nobles.

And now, after ten days, it dawned on Elliott. *The woman's a shut-in.*

“H-Heh heh. You certainly seem to be enjoying the prison to its fullest,” Elliott said, smirking.

“Aren’t I, though?”

“But still! While you’re locked away in here, the world outside is moving! It may gall a prideful woman like you to apologize, but maybe you need to consider the positives and negatives of not being able to leave your cell?”

Rachel kept flipping through her magazine without so much as a glance in Elliott’s direction and quietly said, “Oh, I have considered them.”

“Oh, you have?”

“It’s true I can’t walk about as I please, and the world is passing me by.”

“Yeah, yeah!”

“However...”

“Hm?” Elliott dubiously looked at her.

Rachel, her eyes still on her magazine, said, “So long as I stay in prison, our engagement will stay broken. So I don’t have to take the lessons meant for a future queen. Those tutors of mine won’t put me through the wringer day after day. If you were to take back your decision to break off our engagement, my educators would capture me in no time. This is no joke. No matter what, I can’t possibly expose myself to that risk.”

Elliott paused to think. He knew her teachers. When he was little, they’d chastised him constantly for getting tired of their dull yet spartan lessons and running off. Could you really call the corporal punishment they’d administered to him, despite his rank as prince, education? He’d never seen the lessons Rachel took as one who would become queen, but knowing her instructors, he could imagine what it was like.

Though Rachel lacked the freedom of movement, she could do as she pleased and laze about all day in prison. As his fiancée, she had no freedom and was chained to a desk every day, surrounded by several private tutors who were more like mad dogs, barking at her constantly.

If he had to pick, which would Elliott choose for himself?



Sykes was in the stables checking on the horses when he saw Elliott dragging his feet across the back yard.

“Your Highness, did you go see Miss Rachel?” Sykes called out.

“Yeah...”

Sykes was confused by Elliott’s lack of spirit and cocked his head, but he finished tending the horses and began to clean up.

“How was it? Has Miss Rachel reflected on her actions a little?” Sykes asked.

“No, um... Not at all. And from the sound of things, she won’t come out of there even if she does reflect on things.”

“Huh?”

As Sykes struggled to process what Elliott had just told him, George came rushing over from the palace.

“Oh, thank goodness, I found you, Your Highness!”

“George,” the prince muttered.

“Hey, George,” Sykes greeted. “What’s up?”

George’s face looked awful. At first they thought he was just winded from running over, but that wasn’t it.

“Did something happen?” Elliott asked, feverishly swinging his head up and down like a woodpecker.

“In your office...Your Highness...there’s someone complaining...that they can’t accept my sister’s...imprisonment...” George said between wheezing breaths before finally surrendering to a coughing fit. Sykes rubbed his back as he did.

“Oh. That again?” Elliott sighed. Before now, a number of nobles and courtiers who had spine but lacked reason had come to shout at Elliott about his condemnation of Rachel. “Very well. I’ll go talk them down personally. Let’s go.”

Just as Elliott geared up to head to the office, George cleared his throat.

“The ladies responsible for my sister’s education, led by Duchess Somerset, forced their way into the office like a pack of bulldogs. They kept barking at me with those shrill voices, and I had no idea what to do!”

Elliott stopped and did a one-eighty. He clapped both Sykes and George on the back and said, “Okay, how about we go for a long ride for a change of pace!”

“Huh?! Um, what about the ladies who’ve come to complain?” George asked.

“We’re going now?!” Sykes questioned. “The sun’s about to set!”

“What do I care? Let’s forget our worries and ride!” Elliott exclaimed enthusiastically. “Don’t worry. Once the sun sets, we can spend the night at the royal villa outside the city!”

Elliott dragged his two associates along on a ride through the countryside beneath a reddening sun.

“Your Highness, if we run, they’ll just come back later,” George cautioned.

“I’m not running! I simply, by pure chance, by truly genuine coincidence, find myself compelled to go for a ride and not think about anything!”

10: The Young Lady's Art Explodes

Moonlight shone through the darkness, casting a narrow outline of the window on the floor. It seemed bright enough to read by, yet just next to it, it was so dark that you couldn't tell if anything was there.

In the silent space next to that pool of radiance, Rachel, who'd sunk into the cushions, stirred and then sat up.

"Ungh... Did I sleep too much during the day, perhaps?"

Her mind was too alert now to fall asleep. No one was here to chastise her for it, so she always ended up napping more than she really should. Perhaps she was a little too elated to be living on her own.

Giving up on sleep, Rachel stood. The moon was just visible through the barred window.

"What a beautiful moon. Is it full tonight?"

As she stared at the shining white circle in the sky, Rachel thought of a better idea than getting under the covers again. She piled and arranged some of the wooden boxes to form stairs under the window.

"Here we go."

Pulling an expensive-looking carrying case out of her luggage, she began to ascend the wooden boxes. She sat down at the top and brought her face close to the window to enjoy the night breeze.

"There's something sentimental about serenading the moon."

Rachel took her instrument from its case, wiped the mouthpiece, and brought it to her lips with a dreamy expression on her face.

A jaunty tune played beneath a star-streaked sky.



Elliott was wearing just a nightgown over his pajamas. The dirt on his slippers made it clear he'd rushed straight from his bedroom to the dungeon.

Glaring at Rachel with all the irritation he could muster, Elliott asked, "Rachel, is there anything you'd like to say to me?"

On the other side of the bars, Rachel, still holding her instrument, held the front of her night gown closed as she shyly glanced at the prince.

"Your Highness, sneaking into a young maiden's bedchambers late at night like this... It's unbecoming of you, you know?"

A moment or two passed in silence. Then Elliott kicked the iron bars with his slippers foot.

"That's not it! There's something you ought to say! Something else! Like, 'I'm sorry for bothering you!' Don't go toot-toot-tooting your horn in the middle of the night!"

"Your Highness...this is a trumpet. I know they're both brass

instruments, but a horn is different.”

“I know that! I don’t care, okay?!” Elliott retorted. “So you’re telling me the reason you raised such a racket in the middle of the night is that you saw the moon and got all sentimental?!”

“Yes.”

“And you chose to play ‘Sing, Sing, Sing,’ and ‘Little Brown Jug’?! What kind of sentiment is that?!”

“Oh, my, you’re more cultured than I’d have thought, Your Highness.”

“Don’t mock me! Now, let me make this clear. If there’s a repeat performance of this sort, I’ll bring the knights in to make a pincushion of your sorry hide!”

“Come now. For appearance’s sake, you ought to threaten to do that yourself.”

After Elliott had stormed off in rage, Rachel smiled, pleased with herself. She returned the trumpet to its case.

“I gave it fifty-fifty odds if the sound would reach him, but the wind was on my side, so it was worth giving it a shot.”

Lightly patting down the cushions of her sofa that could have ruined a sage, she lay down with a look of satisfaction on her face.

“Aah... I think I’ll be able to sleep well tonight because of that splendid display of His Highness howling impotently.”



As she stared vacantly at the wall after breakfast, Rachel suddenly recalled she’d brought paint with her.

“Oh, that’s right. I wanted to do something about these dreary walls.”

Because of her performance the night before, Rachel was in an artsy mood. She set about at once searching for the box with the painting supplies. She laid some of the newspaper that had been used for packing on the ground and pried open a well-shaken paint can. She painted a base coat of white on the stone wall and then cocked her head in thought.

“Hmm... It would be a waste to paint something like wallpaper, wouldn’t it?”

At first, Rachel had intended to paint the whole thing peppermint green, a color she was fond of, and then add little detailed flowers all over, but as she looked at the blank wall before her, she felt she’d be missing an opportunity.

“Okay, it’s time to challenge myself to paint a masterpiece!”

Inspiration had struck. If she couldn’t go outside, perhaps a picturesque landscape would be good.



Elliott was resting his elbow on his desk as he scowled at a pile of papers when George hesitantly inquired, "Is something the matter, Your Highness? Have you not slept? There are bags under your eyes."

"Yeah..." Elliott hung his head, resting his forehead on the back of his hand. His face looked rather haggard. "Damn that Rachel! I had that accursed melody of hers stuck in my head and couldn't get a wink of sleep."

"Uh, what?" George asked.

"No, never mind..."

Elliott somehow managed to sit up straight just as Sykes entered and knocked.

"Sykes... You knock *before* entering."

"Oh, right."

Sykes was about to leave so he could do it over again properly, but an irritated Elliott stopped him.

"Practice your manners at home! You came here for a reason, didn't you?!"

"Right, right. Well, you see, we've had complaints about a bizarre stench coming from the dungeon."

Elliott and George looked at each other.

"Don't tell me your sister is already a rotting corpse?" Elliott said in surprise.

"That's just your wishful thinking, Your Highness," George responded. "You met her last night, didn't you? She wouldn't start stinking just half a day later."

"Oh, no, it's not that sort of rotten smell. It's more of an intense acrid one, they said," Sykes explained.

Elliott could only gape in confusion.



When the three of them arrived at the dungeon, their jaws dropped.

"Y-You... Wh-What is this?" Elliott stammered.

The walls had been transformed. What had been a plain stone wall until yesterday was now a flowering prairie and a magnificent ravine with white peaks in the background, covered in perpetual snow. The use of one-point perspective and the shading gave the landscape a three-dimensional, photorealistic feel that made them all gulp.

And yet...

"This is supposed to be a dungeon," Elliott murmured.

What good is a painting like this down here?

The unusual stench from the dungeon was that of paint. Rachel had been painting all day, so its chemical smell had filled the entire basement level.

“Man, it stinks down here. Doesn’t the smell bother you?” Sykes asked.

Rachel, who was putting the finishing touches on her field of flowers, turned around and removed her mask. “It was really something at first, but after working for half a day, your senses get inured and you don’t even notice.”

“You didn’t get sick of it right away?”

“Once I got started, I stopped caring.” Having finished her work, Rachel stepped back as far as she could to get a good look at the result. “Hold on...”

“What?” Sykes asked.

Cocking her head to the side, she wondered, “Wasn’t there a painting like this in my bedroom?”

“Notice that sooner!”

As George watched Rachel and Sykes banter back and forth across the iron bars, it dawned on him that the other person in the room was being awfully quiet.

“Huh? Your Highness?” George prodded.

When he turned to look, what did George see?

“Your Highness?!”

Elliott collapsed on his back, in a stupor.

“Your Highness!!!”

George and Sykes hurriedly helped him into a sitting position, but Elliott’s eyes were rolled all the way back into his head.

“The sleep deprivation followed by this stench must’ve gotten to him,” Sykes noted.

“Who cares what did it?! Hurry and get him outside!” George shouted.

As the men hurriedly rushed out of the room, Rachel concluded, “I managed to mess with His Highness, so I suppose this will do.”

11: The Young Lady Snipes Her Dinner

As Prince Elliott walked down the hallway, he noticed a young man striding through the trees in the rear gardens toward the inner gate. There were a number of men about, but this one was dressed unlike any of the courtiers.

“Hey, isn’t he strange?” Elliott asked. “He doesn’t look like one of the palace servants.”

Sykes looked at the man, who was almost at the inner gate now. “Looks like an employee from one of the restaurants downtown,”

Sykes suggested.

“What would someone of that ilk be doing at the castle?” George asked in exasperation.

There was something about Sykes’s odd suggestion that Elliott couldn’t just laugh off. “What is it? *Something* feels off about this... Ah?!”

Elliott thought for a moment...then took off running as he realized what that something was.

“We’re going to the dungeon!” Elliott yelled behind him.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Your Highness?!”

George and Sykes hurriedly chased after him.

Elliott pointed to the iron door that was now in sight up ahead of them. “Think of the direction he came from! Rachel must be involved with this!”

“Ah!” Sykes gasped.



When the three of them arrived, out of breath, at the dungeon, their jaws hit the floor.

“You can look all you like, but I’m not giving you any...” Rachel insisted. She was sitting in front of a steaming plate, knife and fork in hand. The dish was clearly far too advanced for her to have made on her own in the dungeon. The delicious aroma of freshly cooked food hung in the room.

“Y-You! What is that?!” the prince demanded in a shrill voice.

Rachel looked down at the table. “What is it? Your Highness, I’m sure you must have eaten all these things yourself. Kidney pie, squab fried with herbs, pumpkin potage, and mint jelly. It’s all very common fare.”

“I wasn’t asking about the menu! What are you doing with food prepared outside?!”

Rachel, who had ignored Elliott and began eating, swallowed a mouthful of squab before asking, “Is there some problem?”

“Of course there’s a problem! I said I wouldn’t be giving you any food!”

“Oh, yes. Would that be the time your legs gave out and Lord Sykes had to push your sorry behind out of here?”

“Urgh...”

Daintily wiping her mouth with a napkin, Rachel tilted her wine glass and took a sip. “That’s true. You did tell me you wouldn’t be giving me any food, and that I could go ahead and starve, yes.”

“Yeah!” Elliott crowed.

“But that was a matter of *you* not giving me any, correct?”

“Huh?”

Rachel picked up her knife and began cutting the pie into slices. “I was informed I would not be receiving any prison food, but you never said I wouldn’t be allowed to order meals out of my own pocket.”

“Wha—?! D-Don’t be ridiculous! I’ve never heard of a prisoner ordering food from outside before!”

“Do tell me, what act of what law prohibits a prisoner from ordering food? What article, and what clause?”

“I-I don’t know! But this is common sense!”

“You broke an engagement endorsed by the king using the shaky premise that you did. Are you really one to talk of common sense, Your Highness?”

Elliott was speechless.

“And what kind of common sense is it to imprison a person and then not give them food, pray tell?”

“Urgh. Do you want me to have you charged with lèse-majesté and executed for those statements?”

“You’d first have to drag me out of here and to the execution site for that, now wouldn’t you?”

“Urgh...”

Rachel continued to elegantly enjoy her lunch as the prince groaned, unable to muster any further response.



“Grr, he forbade me from ordering any more food.”

The prince had given the prison guard orders not to allow any workers to come through. Delivery men were to be turned away at the door.

As someone who enjoyed looking for loopholes in the law, it seemed unfair to Rachel that he had changed the rules on her, but... Well, it was what it was.

“His Highness is as inept as ever. And so is my stupid brother. You would think that if he was going to forbid me from ordering in food, he would first make me cough up the details of how I was contacting the outside.”

That would be the normal logic. But Elliott just couldn’t get there. Still...

“A freshly cooked meal just can’t be beat. I’d like to have fresh meat again,” Rachel said, thinking back to the meal she’d just had delivered.

“Oh, this won’t do. I can’t just go back to canned goods without something to bridge the gap.”

She wasn’t in a position to demand such luxuries, but the impact of eating a fresh meal had been great. She wanted to have a little more.

Suddenly, she had a flash of inspiration.

“Oh, I know. One of the fundamentals of the slow life is living off the land. Right?”

Rachel looked toward the narrow barred window that let in fresh air.



In the rear gardens, which were not very well maintained, there was an elderly man in a luxurious outfit taking a walk. Beside him was a younger man who appeared to be in his thirties or early forties.

“Still, I don’t know what to do about Elliott,” said the older man. “To think he would cause an incident like this while Their Majesties are away for an extended period.”

“While you were entrusted with taking care of the palace, you do need to seek permission before acting on an incident caused by the prince himself,” replied the younger man.

Grand Duke Vivaldi, the royal advisor and the king’s uncle, and Marquess August, the prime minister, were consulting about current matters of concern—or really, just griping to each other—in a secluded place.

Prime Minister August looked around. “Still, Your Grace, you’ve chosen an unusual place for our walk.”

The rear gardens had been left untended, and while they were spacious, they were not the kind of carefully sculpted gardens that nobles liked to see.

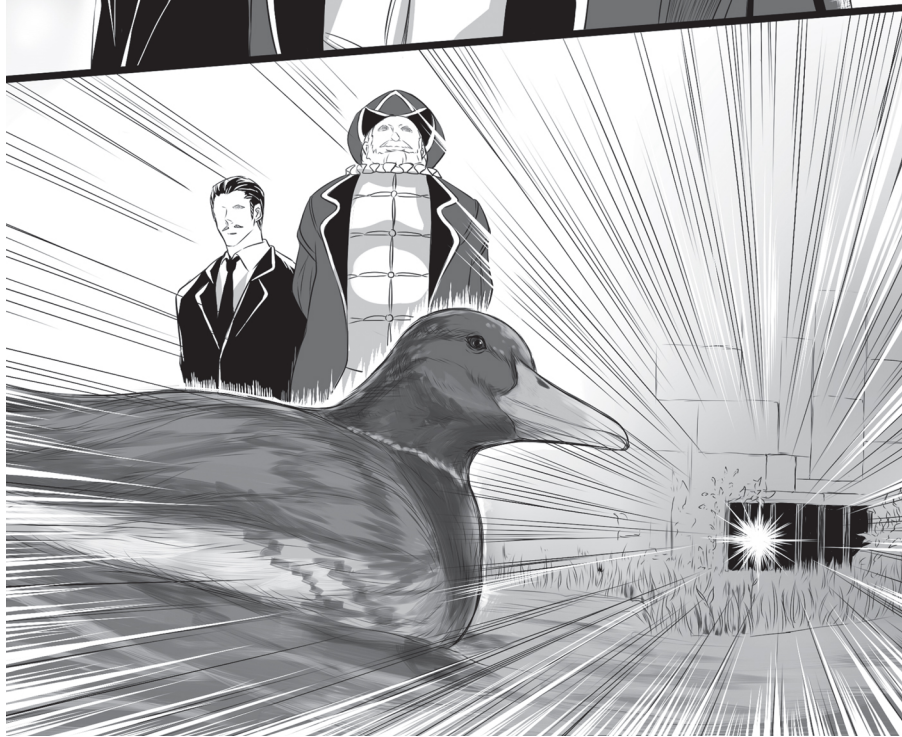
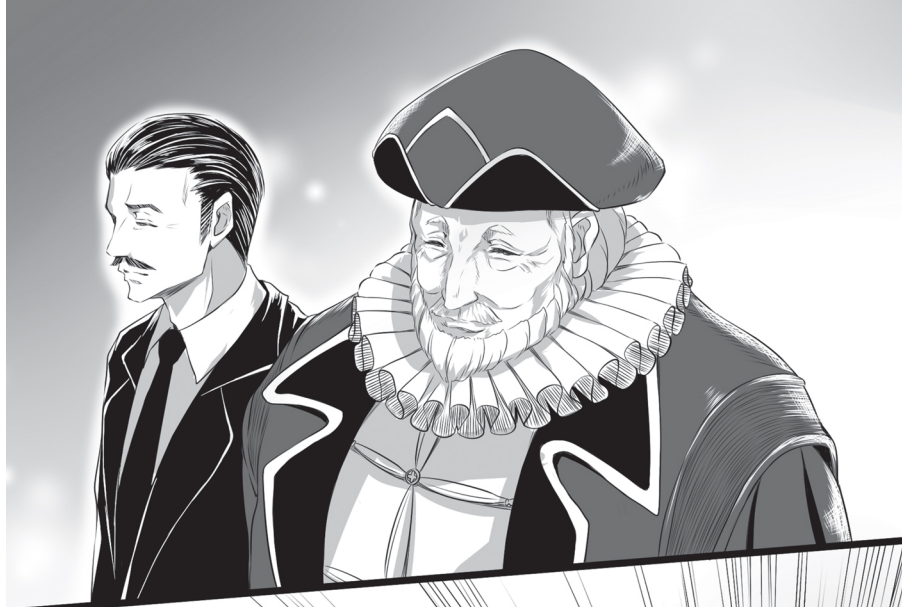
The rotund and good-natured grand duke ducked his head and smiled like he’d been caught in some mischief.

“Ha ha ha ha. This place has its own charms, different from those of a more well-kept garden.” The grand duke spread the long grass with his hands and peered quietly off into the distance. “Look, Prime Minister. Being closer to nature than the front gardens, this place attracts far more wildfowl. Look, my recent favorite is the duck that just landed next to the pond.”

The prime minister, who was likewise hiding in the grass, was impressed. “Oh-ho! He is quite big, isn’t he? Lovely plumage too.”

“Yes. I call him Enrique, and he’s the dearest thing to me.”

Just as the grand duke began talking about his favorite bird...



Thock!

“Squaaaaaawk!”

“What was that?!”

As the two men were watching him, Enrique evidently noticed something and tried to take off, but he let out a loud squawk and fell to the ground. As the birds flew away in utter panic, the men rushed to the side of the pond to see...

Slide.

Slide.

Enrique spasmed about on death’s door as he slowly traveled in a direction he couldn’t have moved on his own. On closer inspection, Enrique had taken a barbed bolt through his chest, and someone was reeling him in using a thin string attached to the end of it.

The grand duke and prime minister followed the long string and reached the decrepit wall of a nearby building. There was a long, hard-to-see slit maybe ten centimeters off the ground, and they arrived at it just as Enrique was pulled inside. Neither said a word.

As they looked at each other in silence, the jubilant voice of a young woman celebrating came from the hole.

“Wow, I’ve landed myself quite the catch! Great! Just great! Now this will be something worth eating!”

Having more or less guessed who she was by her voice, the prime minister crouched down and asked, “Excuse me, if you don’t mind, could you tell us what exactly you’re doing?”

“Who? Me?”

The girl hesitated a moment, then explained herself.



As Elliott and his associates walked down the hall, his great uncle came running along, bawling like a child. The prime minister chased close behind, trying to console him.

“Hm?” Elliott stopped to watch, unsure of what he was witnessing.

The grand duke noticed him and grabbed him by the lapels, still crying. “Elliott, you little wretch!”

“Huh? Me? What’d I do?!”

“It...it’s your fault...”

“What?! Great uncle, what’d, excuse me, what did I do?!”

It would have been easy to break free of the unhealthy old man’s grasp, but he couldn’t mistreat the highest ranking royal while the king and queen were away. Sykes and George couldn’t lay a hand on the uncle of the king either, and they looked at one another as if asking what to do.

“Urrrgh... It’s your fault that Enrique...that Enrique’s...”

“E-En— Who?!”

“Miss Rachel has eaten Enrique!!!”

“Racheeeel!!!”



By the time Elliott rushed to the dungeon, the prison guard was sitting by the entrance, looking like he had no idea what to do. He quickly rose to his feet, smoke rising next to him.

“Hey! What is the meaning of this?!” Elliott demanded.

“Well...” The guard looked pitifully at the smoke billowing out of the door. “The young lady’s started a campfire.”

“A campfire?! Inside the dungeon?!”

“She’s adjusted the level of the flames so she won’t die of asphyxiation.”

“I don’t care about that!” Elliott screamed. “Starting a campfire in the dungeon?! What is she thinking?!”

The prison guard scratched his head. “She got her hands on some fresh duck and wanted to barbecue it.”

“Damn her!”

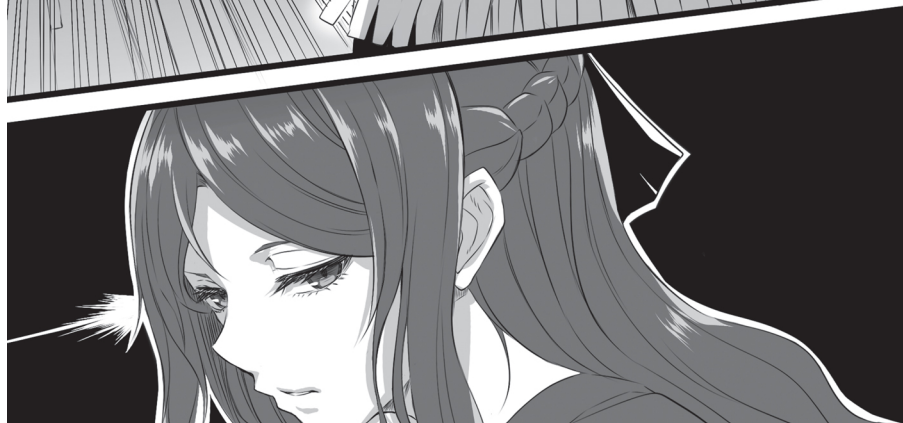
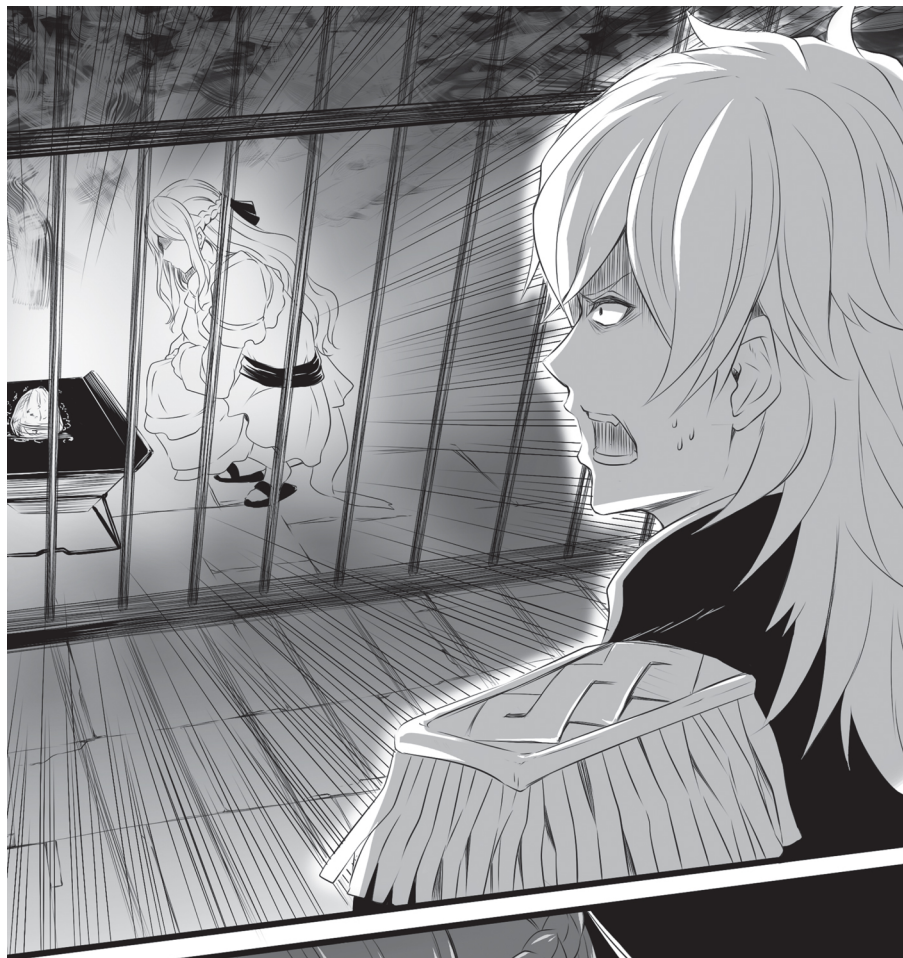
When Elliott reached the cell bars, he could see the smoke gathering near the ceiling, escaping through the door that led to the stairs, so it wasn’t actually that smoky in the basement itself. Inside the cell, the stone tile floor had made a reappearance, and Rachel had started a small campfire on it by breaking down some empty boxes to use as firewood. There was an iron plate over the fire and meat sizzling on top of it. Sykes, who couldn’t read the situation, was sniffing the air hungrily.

Ignoring the many things that he’d have liked to call out, Elliott leveled a finger at Rachel—who was flipping the meat with a serious look on her face—and said, “Rachel! No campfires, and no barbecues in the dungeon!”

Without so much as looking at him, Rachel briefly replied, “There’s no such rule.”

“Because it’s obvious! In what world would anyone have a campfire in a dungeon?!” Elliott shouted, stamping his feet angrily.

Finding a moment to look away from the meat, Rachel glanced at him and said, “Well. You have to evaluate these things on a case-by-case basis. Might I suggest that anyone starving and denied food would do the same?”



“I’ve never heard of it happening anywhere.”

“Well, it is rare for someone to have a crossbow and bolts inside a prison.”

“In other words, only you! Only you would do a thing like this!” With a look of great displeasure, Elliott lowered his volume and said, “I’m led to believe that you told my great uncle that I haven’t been feeding you.”

“Yes, I do believe I did,” Rachel replied, happily popping a piece of salted duck meat into her mouth.

Pointing at her, Elliott said, “If I give you food, you’ll stop this nonsense, then!”

That’s the largest concession I can make!

Elliott was infuriated that he couldn’t bend this nasty woman to his will, not even in the slightest. But after all his great uncle’s hysterical shouting, he decided he was going to have to break the siege to prevent this from happening again—as much as it galled him.

Damn you, Rachel. You can say what you like for now. But when father returns, I’ll indict you for all your crimes, including all the selfish drivel you just spewed.

Elliott was starting to think he’d be okay with having Rachel executed at this point. What he didn’t know was that she hadn’t even gotten serious yet.

At first, Elliott had just wanted to force Rachel into a corner and make her submit to him, but when she started doing as she pleased, all the damage ended up being on his side, to his mental well-being in particular.

I’m going to have to settle with isolating her for now. If it keeps her quiet, some old bread is a small price to pay.

Prince Elliott had made a generous proposal—as much as it galled him. But after finishing her delicious meal, Rachel, who didn’t care how he felt, turned to him and said, “Food from you, Your Highness? Seeing as I have no way of knowing what you might put in it, I won’t be needing any.”

Chapter 3: Let's Get Proactive

12: The Young Lady Bribes the Prison Guard

All this reading was making her shoulders sore, so Rachel tried changing things up by adding embroidery to her daily schedule. After she mindlessly stitched on a handkerchief for a while, she laid down her needle to see how it was coming along.

Looking at the embroidered flowers made only from outlines, Rachel murmured, "Hmm... It's all a little too quiet."

She wasn't talking about her embroidery. Rachel had learned of the impending end of her engagement a month ago, around the time the prince began plotting. She'd chosen not to stop him as he prepared to act because that seemed...more "amusing." She'd wanted to see just what that boneheaded prince and his lackeys could do too. Plus, if she were in prison, she could skip her lessons, at least until the king demanded the engagement stand. There had also been a certain excitement that something she hadn't thought of might cause unexpected trouble.

For those reasons, Rachel had played along with the prince's conspiracy, but Elliott was even shallower than she'd thought. It had been a week, and he hadn't come up with anything other than trying to starve her out. She'd hoped that he would try far more underhanded methods of getting at her so she could make them all blow up in his face.

"If this is how it's going to be, then I let him shame me for nothing. How dull."

Rachel, who'd been staring into space for a while, took another sip of her already cold drink. The lingering fragrance of high-quality tea leaves tickled her nostrils. Then she smiled.

"Yes, I think I see the problem. Perhaps all this passive waiting isn't like me. I had thought the prince would be the one making the moves, but... Yes, I think I'll take the fight to him myself."



Prison breaks often took place late at night, so the guard had to patrol then too.

"There's just one young lady in the palace dungeon now, and I can't see her breaking out..." the guard mused. Still, a job was a job.

The guard's footsteps echoed as he descended the staircase to the dungeon. When he reached the cell, he found the young lady sitting on the floor with the lights turned down. She seemed to be awake despite the late hour. She was leaning against a cushion as she gazed out the little window.

"What are you doing?" the guard asked out of simple curiosity, and her beautiful visage, illuminated by the moonlight, turned to face him.

"Oh, Mr. Guard. It's a lovely night. The moon is out, so I was just looking up at it." She tipped back the shot glass she was holding in her fingers.

Detecting a familiar scent, the guard looked at her suspiciously. "Oh, come on now. A young lady like you, drinking whiskey?"

Whiskey was a hard drink, and if she was drinking it out of a shot glass, it was probably straight. If she were a man, then sure; there were some among the nobility who had a taste for it. However, it was generally a drink of the working class, not high society.

"Oh, you can tell just by the smell? You must be a fan. Would you join me for a drink?"

"You're already drunk. Wait, what?!"

Seeing the way Rachel jovially held the bottle out to him, the guard reacted with dismay...then shock, as he did a double take.

"Hold up! That's a thirty-year-old bottle of St. Valentine's, isn't it?"

"My, you do know your stuff," Rachel said admiringly.

"That's one hell of a drink you've got there. It costs more than two months of my salary."

"I simply took a sealed bottle from my father's cellar. It's not a big deal. Here, have a glass."

The guard hesitated. "No, in my position, I can't. But it's a thirty-year-old St. Valentine's..."

"I have snacks to go with it too." She offered him a tray with slices of corned beef, raisin butter, pickles, smoked cheese, and crackers with liver pâté. "Go on, knock it back."

"Oh, so this is a thirty-year-old whiskey!"

Rachel now had him right where she wanted him. Was there a guard alive who could possibly say no to such a legendary item? No, there was not.

When the guard gave in and drained the whole glass, Rachel extended the brown bottle toward him again.

"You drank that like a champ. Now, follow it up with another three."

Just as the guard was regretting that he'd polished off such an exquisite drink so quickly, Rachel poured him another glass of the

fragrant amber liquid. He had a second, a third, and a fourth glass. Once he'd gotten used to the drink, Rachel offered him a different bottle. Having forgotten his duties by now, the guard didn't even notice that Rachel had stopped drinking herself.

"Whiskey really does have to be straight," Rachel remarked. "The finish simply cannot be beaten."

"So you get it too?! This aroma at the back of the nasal passage is the best! You sure know your drinks, young lady!"

"Oh, not at all compared to you, Mr. Guard. Would you fancy a chocolate?"

"Ooh! Thanks!"

The prison guard was now completely intoxicated, and he'd let his guard down. While he was full of fine liquor, enjoying himself, Rachel began sweet-talking him. She even gave him an unopened bottle to take home.

"Whew, now that we're talking, you're pretty easy to get along with!" the guard blurted.

"Hee hee, I do like to think I'm good with people, even if it may not seem that way. But Prince Elliott is always talking about himself, you know? It's not that we had nothing to talk about; it's that it was impossible to have a conversation with him. It's maddening."

"Oh, I get that. I really do. I mean, just look at the guy. He's clearly an idiot." The guard hiccuped. "Yeah, you did nothing wrong!"

Their fun time drinking together had crushed any suspicion the guard might have had. He didn't realize that she was skillfully talking around him, so everything Rachel said went straight through to his brain. By the time they parted, he was convinced that the prince was an evil moron, while Rachel was pitiable and good.

"It's gotten quite late," Rachel said, yawning. "Mind your step on the way home. We wouldn't want you dropping that bottle, would we?"

"Yeah, I'll do that! Oh, right! I'll make it easy for you to get in contact with the outside world, so if you've got anything more like this to share, let me know, would you?"

"Of course. If I have the freedom to meet with people and send letters, I think I'll be able to get more and more treats for both of us."

"Sounds like a plan. Okay, I'll figure something out."

"Please do."



Once the guard finished tottering up the steps, holding his precious gift tightly as he stumbled along, a shadowy figure stood up in a lightless corner of the prison.

"Young Mistress, you needn't induce a petty official like that to

help you. We can bring you most anything you need..."

Rachel, who was arranging her cushions before going to bed, grinned. "This is the same as with the gate guards. It's important that the courtiers back me over the prince. For my plan, in particular, I'll be needing their sympathy and cooperation so that I can mock Prince Elliott to his face."

"Yes, ma'am. It seems I spoke out of turn. As for the mansion, we will be making the preparations we discussed the other day."

"See to it."

As the shadowy figure disappeared once more into the darkness, Rachel pulled the covers over her and turned out the lights.

13: The Young Lady Kills Time

Rachel looked up through the bars at the clear sky.

"It's a fine day. The larks are flying so high."

Rachel did, occasionally, long for the freedom she'd known before being sent to prison.

"Not that I can go outside..."

Well, it was more a case of wouldn't than couldn't.

Suddenly, it occurred to Rachel that it might be fun to throw paper airplanes. Oh, if only they could fly through the sky in her place. She went looking and found some scratch paper with notes on it that she didn't need anymore.

"There's more to making paper airplanes than I'd have thought."

The shape and folds could entirely change how they flew. The ones she tried to make stylish didn't fly that far, but with the thin paper she was using, the wind would sometimes pick them up and carry them to the other side of the wall. She got really into trying different folding methods to make a variety of paper airplanes. The white pieces of paper flew this way and that, and some that had touched down already caught a gust of wind and lifted off again.

Rachel's inventions kept soaring into the sky from her little window until she had used up all the paper.



Prince Elliott happened to be looking up at the sky when he spotted some paper trash dancing about at a low altitude. It was nothing for one of his stature to concern himself with, but what caught his attention was the different shapes flying by one after another. There was everything from proper paper airplanes to simple paper tubes. It was clear that someone had to be making them.

When Elliott picked up one that happened to land nearby, he realized there was something written on it.

“Hm?”

Opening it up, he saw a neat but hastily written note that said:

“Scoop: The Prince’s Long Hair is to Hide His Baldness?!”

Elliott let the note drop to the ground. Then, before it could catch the wind again, he hurriedly picked it back up.

“What is this?!” he exclaimed, rushing to gather up the other papers.

“The Pretty Boy Prince’s Ten Year War against Dermatophytosis: His Hopeless Battle with Athlete’s Foot.”

“A Personal Room in the Town Brothel: The Prince’s Debauched Personal Life.”

“The Palace in an Uproar! Failing Marks in All Subjects! Ministers Speechless at the Prince’s Inability to Study!”

Elliott felt faint just reading them, but when the wind tried to snatch them out of his hands, he hurriedly adjusted his grip on the stack of papers.

“What is all this made-up gossip?! Don’t tell me it’s flying all over!”

He looked around and saw an airplane here, and another airplane there.

“Oh, for the love of God!”

To top it all off, on the other side of the wall, he heard the children in the castle town singing a song he’d never heard before.

“One day our prince got up on a horse.

He took one step, and he slipped of course.

On his second step, the prince did fall.

He can’t control his horse at all.

Oh, our prince, he doesn’t know how to ride.

’Cause poor Ellie’s head’s got no brain inside!”



Elliott’s footsteps echoed through the prison as he raced down the stairs.

“Racheeeeeel?!” Holding a lance, he thrust it through the bars into the cell. “Youuuuuu! I’ll kill you! Kill you dead! Kill you real dead!”

After he’d thrust his weapon several times, Rachel, who was reclining on her cushions in the back of the prison and reading a book, glanced in his direction.

“Your Highness, jousting lances are powerful, but not very long. Couldn’t you realize that without a woman explaining it to you?”

“At least be a little scared, you impudent wench!” Elliott cried.

“Your only redeeming feature is your pretty face, so I do think you had best watch the way you speak. It’s unbecoming of you.”

“Is there anything more unbecoming than what you’ve just

done?!” Elliott threw the papers he’d collected against the iron bars. “What is this?! You’re spreading slanderous lies about me! I wouldn’t have expected you to try and sully my name like this, you dirty liar!”

“That’s awfully rich, coming from a man who condemned me on the testimony of just one party...”

Rachel glanced down at the pile of memos, then back at Elliott.

“I had no particular intention of slandering you, Your Highness.”

“Then what are these?! Let’s hear you try to come up with an excuse for spreading this drivel!”

Rachel sat up and closed her book. “Where is the slander against you?”

“Where, you ask? It’s all libelous!”

Rachel pointed to one of the pieces of paper that had landed inside her cell.

“Please, read it more carefully. This one only says ‘the prince,’ right? There are *hundreds* of princes out there, you realize? If you immediately assumed it was about you, perhaps you have a persecution complex? Why not talk to a doctor about it?”

“Just who do you think has put me under all this stress?!” Elliott snapped. “The children in town were singing an extremely disrespectful song about ‘Ellie’! That had an actual name in it!”

“You think this ‘Ellie’ is you? Why, it could just as easily be an Ellison, or an Ellington, or an Ellery, couldn’t it? You’re so self-conscious, Your Highness.”

“A prince! With the name Ellie! And around here?! I’m the only person who fits those criteria, and you know it! Don’t be ridiculous!”

Rachel frowned. “You’ve been getting smarter lately... It’s not cute.”

“What is that look for?! Your words and actions have already gone past the point of being merely disrespectful!”

“I seem to have already gone too far, so what could a little more add to the list of charges?”

Elliott glared into the cell. “So, you admit it then?! That you’ve been mocking me!”

Ignoring the chimpanzee prince, who was screeching and trying to intimidate her outside her cage, Rachel opened her book.

“I told you, that wasn’t my intention. It’s true that I made some paper airplanes to kill time. But I just used whatever scrap paper I had lying around.”

“Scrap paper?! With what it said?! What could you possibly have to write that would leave notes like that lying around?!”

“I happen to be working as a copywriter for an underground publisher. Those are candidate titles for a gossip rag.”

“What kind of job is that for the daughter of a duke?!”



“The prince is so stupid it makes my head hurt. He didn’t even point out that it was weird for me to be working from inside a jail cell,” Rachel said, sighing.

The prince had finally managed to strike a blow against her! If you could call it that?

Rachel grumbled as she pulled all of her books out of the wooden boxes.

“Hrm... I knew it. I’ve read everything I brought here with me.”

She’d packed every interesting-looking book she could lay her hands on, but with the excessive amount of free time she had, she’d read through every last one of them. There was an appeal to rereading things, but it was still too soon for that.

“And I just finished with my embroidery too.”

George’s best outfit, which she had brought with her—without asking—now had a dynamic pattern embroidered onto it—without his permission.

The black mantelet depicted a battle between dragon and phoenix in gold and silver thread. It would go perfectly with his faux intelligence and his scowling glasses-guy image. They would no doubt praise him with such comments as, “Whoa, there’s a guy drunk on the idea that he’s omnipotent,” and, “How old is he? Does he still think, ‘I was chosen by God,’ or something?”

“George is sure to be popular in this. I’ve worked hard for my little brother.”

He was certainly going to shed tears of gratitude. She’d have to have someone sneak it back into his closet later.

With her hobbies exhausted, Rachel now had nothing to keep her occupied at night.

“I’ve been forbidden from music and hunting too.”

It would be entertaining to deliberately break those bans, but she was sick of the prince right now and didn’t want to make him rush in here in the middle of the night.

“Honestly, making a fuss in a young lady’s room in the middle of the night. His Highness lacks discretion,” Rachel whispered, a criticism that might have been more valid were she not the direct cause of him doing so.

Rachel began looking around for something to do. Suddenly, her eyes fell on some writing paper. She’d sent her scrap paper off as paper airplanes, but she still had plenty of blank paper.

“I know... If I have no novels, I can try writing my own.”

She wouldn’t brag about it herself, but Rachel was a creative

individual. She'd even written books before. While she'd never penned anything long, she was blessed with an abundance of time and material here.

"Hmm, my protagonist will be Prince Vermouth, the prince of a small country. An idiot, loyal to his desires and loath to think about anything difficult. He falls into traps and chases after any girl he sees, and his own horse even horses around with him."

As she wrote down the character's background, story ideas and side characters popped into her head one after another. Even just looking at the list of bullet points gave her the feeling that she had quite a lengthy work on her hands here.

"Yes, I like it! If I have no novels, I'll just have to write my own!"

Rachel rounded up all the paper and ink she had, bringing the light closer and taking pen in hand.



One night a few days later, a woman emerged from the shadows in front of the cell bars. She quietly called out to Rachel, who was writing something, and said, "Young Mistress, I brought the things you requested because you said it was urgent, but...what do you plan to use these things for?"

She approached the bars and slipped the items she'd brought inside the cell. There were four or five stacks of writing paper wrapped in brown waxed paper, and two or three cardboard boxes with a dozen ink bottles in each. In all, it amounted to a few thousand sheets of paper and plenty of ink. It was more than what an individual would normally go through.

"These aren't from the ducal house, I hope?" Rachel asked.

"No, I bought them in town," the woman replied, shaking her head. "No matter who you give them to, no one will be able to trace them back to you."

Rachel handed the woman a large stack of papers—what she'd finished so far. It was written in neat, easy-to-read script, but...well, it was an awful lot.

Rachel, bags under her eyes, smiled at her servant as the woman looked through her work.

"There was a publisher who was good at distributing things underground while keeping the author a secret, right?" Rachel asked.

"Yes, ma'am. I have some ideas, but why?"

"I want that manuscript spread all around town at once. They can retain my share of the profit, so have them keep the price low and print as many copies as they can to sell in the capital."

Rachel handed over the ending she'd just finished to her servant and rubbed the bridge of her nose. It was clearly time to turn in for

the night.

“Whew. After working this hard, I feel more exhausted than I have in quite some time.”

Her servant, who had been looking through her work, cocked her head to the side. “Young Mistress... To be honest, I cannot imagine there was such a desperate need to finish this right now.”

“That’s because you don’t understand the creative process. When inspiration strikes, you have to throw everything you have into your work before your passion cools. Heh... Heh heh... You know, I got so into it that I finished three volumes of *The Moronic Prince’s Great Adventure*, and two of a spin-off titled *His Highness Is After Me*.”

It went without saying that Rachel had used her abundance of personal experience to write the ways Prince Vermouth humiliated himself, but she figured she could just add a disclaimer saying, “This story is a work of fiction,” and it would all be good.

In the spin-off, an innocent and stupid young boy named Hanks aims to become a knight, and when the prince unexpectedly recognizes his talent, he rises up in the world. The kindly prince chooses Hanks to be his personal knight, but it turns out that, actually, the prince swings that way and is after him. High jinks ensue.

These days, the literacy rate was rising, and there was a lot of press around popular novels. If it was interesting, they’d likely read it.

“I went to all the trouble of writing it, so I most certainly want the public to read it. I’ll be writing more too, so I’m counting on you, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Her servant nodded, but instead of leaving, she continued flipping through the manuscript.

“Young Mistress.”

“Yes?”

“Two of your pages are misnumbered. Also, in *His Highness*, don’t you think the reader will get bored in the key scene where Elliott forces himself on Sykes if you have them do it three time in a row between the lines, ‘Ah?!’ and ‘I’ve been tainted...’? And if I might venture to offer a personal opinion, I think I’d like it better if Sykes were a weak-willed top instead.”

“I wasn’t asking you to go so far as editing it. But fine, go ahead and fix anything that seems strange.”



Mr. Robinson of the Mouse & Rat Company wiped his bald head with his handkerchief and smiled at the unidentified woman who’d come in saying she wanted a novel published through black market routes.

“Okay, I understand your conditions for publishing it. Our public-facing business has nothing to do with publishing at all, so you can count on us to cover up where it came from. I’ll have this all over the place without people even knowing we were involved. Now, by the way...”

Robinson pointed to two different spots in the manuscripts that were supposed to have the same meaning.

“In the first volume, the prince is Vermouth, and the knight is Hanks, but later on it changes to Elliott and Sykes. Was the author writing with someone in mind? I think one of these must be the names of the people she was modeling them on. Which would you like to standardize it to?”

Model commoner that he was, Mr. Robinson didn’t even know the names of his own country’s royal family. And the maid who’d come to deliver it was far too influenced by Rachel.

“I think it would probably be good with Elliott and Sykes.”



Elliott noticed that Sykes had been a bit cold to him lately, always staying at an inconvenient distance.

“Sykes, did something happen?” Elliott asked.

“No, Your Highness, don’t let it bother you,” Sykes said as he smiled awkwardly and covered his butt.

Elliott cocked his head to the side in confusion.

14: The Prince is Led Astray by a Debate

“I come to see you after a few days and... Rachel, what is the meaning of this?!”

Prince Elliott’s all-too-familiar shouting prompted Rachel to raise her sleep mask and glance in his direction.

“Honestly, Your Highness, coming into a woman’s bedchambers and shouting so loudly? Things like that will reveal your upbringing to people.”

“I’m the prince of this country, not some lowly bumpkin who needs to hide his origins! Besides, if you call this your bedchambers, where is your living room, huh?!”

“Fine, then please remodel the prison to have two rooms.”

George poked the prince’s shoulder. “Your Highness, you’re getting off track.”

“You’re right,” the prince replied. “Rachel, that’s not what I asked you about! What’s going on with all these things inside your cell?!”

“It’s been like this for a while now. What’s strange about it? I’m tired, you know?”

“It’s totally different! You must have been leaving the prison!”

“I haven’t left,” Rachel protested sleepily. Then she put her sleep mask back on and crawled under her down blanket.

The mountain of wooden boxes that had been scattered around the prison had now been neatly restacked, increasing the amount of space. That was fine. Maybe Rachel had tidied up in her spare time. However...

“You were sleeping on cushions before now, weren’t you?!” Elliott questioned. “Where did that canopy bed come from?!”

“Mngh... It’s been here awhile,” Rachel answered, nonplussed.

“Fine, then what about that high pile carpet and reclining sofa with an ottoman?! What about the charcoal briquette stove?! And, worst yet, what is that writing desk by the window?! It’s too big to fit in the door! How did you even get it in here?!”

“Nngh... You’re so noisy. I told you, it was all here to begin with.”

“Don’t you lie to me!!!”

Rachel must have been tired, because she rubbed her eyes through her sleep mask, then pulled on the cord hanging beside the bed. There was a whooshing sound as a drop curtain fell just inside the bars of her cell.

The curtain had one word written on it in big letters: “CLOSED.”

“Whaa...?” Elliott squeaked.



Elliott gathered a group of close to ten young men in his office. They were the sons of influential nobles, the same as Sykes and George, and were both Elliott’s hangers-on and members of the Margaret fan club. While Sykes and George seemed to do all the talking, Elliott had a number of people who trailed behind him like goldfish poop, and he’d gathered them all together, no matter whether he had business with them today. It was unusual for him to do this without some occasion, but the situation he found himself in right now was a bigger deal than some ball.

Sitting at the head of the table, Elliott looked at them all with a bitter expression as he said, “I thought I had condemned Rachel, but she does whatever she pleases. It’s even worse than before. I want to discuss whether there’s anything we can do against her.”

Despite Elliott’s bold declaration of his pathetic position, no one present had the common sense to call him on it.

With a strained look on his face, Elliott turned to his close friend. “First of all, George. Didn’t you tell me you had your house under control?! How did the inside of the prison end up like that?!”

“W-Well... There was no indication anywhere inside the house that she’d prepared that sort of thing, Your Highness. None of the

servants appeared to be acting strangely either.”

This man who, on paper at least, was supposed to be talented, had never considered his sister might have a base of operations in town.

“What’s the guard have to say for himself?” Sykes, who hadn’t been tagging along earlier that day, asked George. “It has to be a dereliction of duty that he overlooked all this, right?”

“Well, you see...he has other duties, and he only visits the dungeon on patrol. He was shocked to see how things had changed when he went there today.”

“Hmph, what a dolt,” Sykes muttered, though a meathead like him had to be about the last person the guard would have wanted calling him that.

“Creating openings is a specialty of hers, after all! Damn you, Rachel!” Elliott slammed his hands down on the desk, his face contorted with rage. “Would most noblewomen be so defiant after being tossed in a dungeon?! I thought a few days in there would make her cry and beg for forgiveness. How could that boring woman, whose only redeeming quality was that she would keep her mouth shut and do as she was told, have changed so completely?!”

“It is too big of a change, I’ll admit,” George agreed.

Most people only had that one image of Rachel, so this was more than just letting her mask slip a little to reveal her true character. It was such a complete and total switch that some among them had lost all trust in women entirely.

“I banished her from polite society to save Margaret, whom she was oppressing! So why do I have to spend every waking moment thinking about Rachel, Rachel, Rachel. I can’t even sleep for worrying about what she might pull next! Her face is burned into my mind twenty-four seven, and I can’t get it to go away!”

Seeing the way this whole situation had consumed the prince’s life, Sykes winked and snapped his fingers, striking a pretentious pose that didn’t suit the buff lunkhead at all.

“Your Highness, that’s what they call...love,” Sykes declared.

Elliott chucked a vase of flowers at Sykes’s face, then ignored his moans of pain as he turned to the rest of his minions.

“Call it what you will. Does no one have any idea how we can teach her a lesson?”

The assembled men looked at one another, already sensing failure from the way their prince was talking. Still, they offered what ideas came to mind.

“How about you smoke her out?” asked one young man.

“She already did that to me,” Elliott noted.

“Then why not put something that stinks in there?” asked another.

“She already did that to me.”

"You could get other people involved and have them harass her."

"She already did that to me."

"Or what about spreading nasty rumors about her?"

"She already did that to me."

Elliott glared at the young men. "You people... Did you come here today to mock me?!"

"Nooo?! We never imagined you'd have failed so much..."

Though they shook their heads and denied it, the young men didn't realize that they were only kicking Elliott while he was already down. Fortunately, one man was there to tell them off for it.

Standing beside his emotionally scarred prince, George countered by saying, "Listen up, all of you. His Highness has not failed. His opponent simply beat him."

"I don't need your corrections!" Elliott snapped. A firm boot to the butt sent George tumbling face-first into the table and left him sprawled on the floor.

"Still, to get back to the topic at hand," a young man seated to the right said, raising his hand. He was the son of a count. "Sir Ferguson, it seems her personality has changed considerably since she was sent to prison. Is it not inevitable that all our prior predictions no longer pan out?"

"Oh!" Elliott blurted. "You could say that, yes."

The woman who'd once demurely followed behind the prince had, even if only while she was in the dungeon, turned into a crazy woman who got carried away doing whatever she pleased.

At this point, the air in the room changed, filling with excitement. Speculation was easier than offering concrete proposals.

"What if that one's a replacement, and the prince has already killed her?" said one young man.

"If I'd killed her, why would I hold a meeting like this?!" Elliott protested.

"Or maybe she's a body double, and the original's skipped town," suggested another.

"Who chooses a fake who's crazier and has more personality?"

As the discussion shifted from a strategy meeting to a debate on whether the young lady was a fake, one young man, the eldest son and heir of a viscount, raised his hand.

"Let's set aside the question of her authenticity. What's got me curious is... Well, I don't know how to say this, but...don't you think Rachel's gotten sexier all of a sudden?"

"You said it!"

Elliott's minions all nodded in agreement. Even Elliott, who was watching with exasperation as the meeting went off the rails, had been feeling the same way. Her hairstyle had remained the same, and

she still barely used any makeup, but...her face was highly expressive, and even though she only wore loungewear, she gave off a much more sensuously enchanting aura now.

The young men talked about her excitedly.

"It's like her every gesture is filled with sexuality."

"Yeah! Is it because her face shows more expression? There's something vibrant about her, like she was a black and white sketch that's been colorized."

The pubescent boys' conversation continued on in this vein, but...

"You know, if she's changed that much, maybe being His Highness's fiancée was really hard on her?"

"Oh. Now that you mention it, she got a whole lot more cheerful as soon as their engagement was broken."

"She seems so full of life without a fiancé weighing her down."

The conversation was heading in a weird direction again. In between their sympathetic whispers, they glanced with furrowed brows at their leader.

"Whose side are you people on?!" Elliott shouted, a vein pulsing on his forehead. They all ducked their heads, none of them uttering another word. "The change in her goes well beyond just being more cheery! We need to acknowledge that she's a snake that's been hiding her true nature up until now!"

Elliott looked to his left and right. "Honestly, you people. Why are you letting Rachel deceive you this late in the game?"

"Sorry, sir..."

"Who cares that she's gotten more cheery! Haven't you noticed anything else while watching her?" Elliott asked.

No one dared point out that the prince had had more contact with her than anyone else.

As the young men thought about it, the son of a marquess raised his hand.

"There is one thing that's caught my attention," he said.

"What is it? Speak up!" Elliott demanded.

"Yes, sir." The marquess's son looked to each of the others, making sure he had their attention. "Miss Rachel...actually has a pretty impressive figure, wouldn't you say?"

The room fell silent. However, there was a definite shift from a meeting on how to handle Rachel to something more like a boys' trip after the lights went out.

Unable to bear the silence, one of the men quietly said, "I dunno... Didn't Miss Ferguson always have those proportions?"

The marquess's son shook his head. "You know that ladies normally wear a corset when they go out in public. Rachel did too, of course, but now that she has claimed the dungeon as her own private

space, all she wears is loungewear. Meaning...she's not wearing a corset."

Those words, spoken in hushed tones, sent the largest tremor yet through the crowd despite their low volume. These sorts of details about a young lady they were acquainted with were the sexiest things young boys in puberty like them could imagine.

The count's son pinched his nose. "What the hell? That's hot!"

"What are you saying, so soon? I haven't even gotten to the main issue yet!" the marquess's son stressed. "Miss Rachel feels like she's in her own room and is wearing the least guarded clothing she ever will. Now, with that in mind... Are you following me?"

They were the only ones in the room, but the boys huddled close, trading furtive glances before nodding.

"She looks like that without having to do anything to dress herself up! Do you understand?! She's not using a corset to shrink her waist, or to push up her breasts. And because she's not showing off, she's not stuffing her chest with those infernal fake pads! Without any artificial assistance, she's managed to maintain that hourglass figure!"

"Good lord!" exclaimed one of the young men.

Excited murmurs rushed around the table. The young men were losing their minds, as if this were the revelation of the century. They whispered rapidly among themselves about this shocking discovery.

At some point, even Elliott had gotten caught up in the excitement, idly mumbling to himself, "What a brilliant deduction. I should have expected no less from the heir to the Booblansky family, a family that has produced scholars generation after generation!"

"Your Highness, my family name is Wolanski," corrected the marquess's son.

"Wait, wait! Hold on!" George cried, throwing cold water on their excitement. He was the one man who couldn't get behind this discussion. "Maybe my sister does have an impressive figure, but you people aren't planning to abandon Margaret for her just because of that, are you?!"

Snapping back to reality in an instant, Elliott and the others quickly denied it.

"No, hold on. Those are completely separate issues," Elliott explained. "I didn't choose Margaret for her figure! We have a more, uh, spiritual connection, you could say. She soothes me."

Sykes nodded. "Yeah, His Highness is right. I'm not expecting anything from Margaret's figure. I think her curve-less, no, um, I mean slender... No, that's not it... Her realistic proportions have their own charms."

"No, I was saying her heart was more important than her body..." Elliott grumbled under his breath, shocked that Sykes had somehow

ended up with a warped and off base interpretation of what he'd been arguing.

"Sir Ferguson," the marquess's son continued. "It may be true that Madam Margaret loses out to your sister in terms of the ideal figure. However—"

"Yeah, you tell him, Booblansky!" Elliott cheered.

"It's Wolanski."

Wolanski, who'd just finished extolling his praises for Rachel's body mere moments ago, stood up and raised his fist to give an impassioned speech.

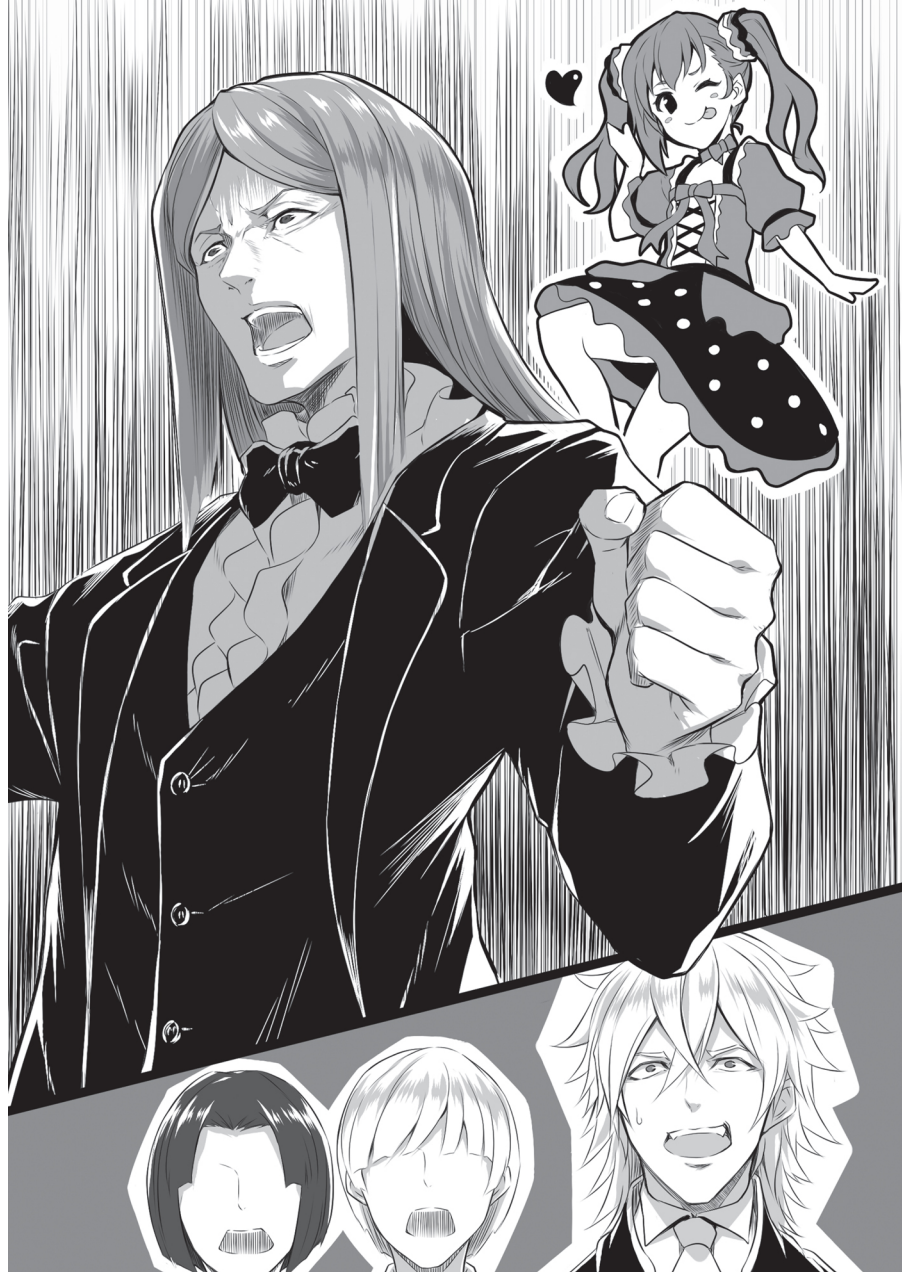
"Being from a common background, Madam Margaret certainly hasn't been able to 'build' her body in the same way. Even clothed, you can tell she lacks noticeable curves. Her breasts, though not non-existent, aren't particularly big. While her arms and legs are not fat, neither would we call them slim."

"Huh? Aren't you insulting her?" Sykes asked.

"Shh! Shut up, Sykes!" Elliott hissed.

Wolanski continued, only growing more heated.

"However, that is fine! It is all good!" he asserted. "Born noblewomen will, at times, torment their bodies and hide their true features to make themselves beautiful. Here is what I want to ask: are we okay with that?!"



“But didn’t you just finish praising Miss Rachel’s beauty?!” the count’s son argued back loudly.

The marquess’s son nodded, as if that was exactly what he’d wanted to hear.

“What do Miss Rachel and Miss Margaret have in common?” he asked.

“In common?” the count’s son echoed.

One of them was a highborn young lady who’d been the natural choice for the prince’s fiancée, and who, despite not being especially flashy, had proportions that were well above average. The other was a common girl who’d lucked into becoming the lowest sort of nobility, and who had an innocent charm and a cute, child-like body. They were so far apart in both appearance and personality that everyone had to rack their brains to find something they had in common.

With a solemn tone, as if he were delivering a divine oracle, Wolanski said, “They are both natural. Even if you were to strip away everything they have, their figures would not change. The bodies that God gave us were not meant to be forcibly constrained or covered up with makeup! Yes, that is what I want to say. A woman’s beauty is natural!”

“Ohhhhhhhh!!!”

When he concluded his speech, Wolanski posed as if gazing up unto the heavens, and the boys hooted and howled with approval. Their discussion had come to an emotional finale. The meeting that Elliott had called ended on this high note, with the members adopting the Naturalist Declaration espoused by Wolanski. The participants left Elliott’s office saying things like, “We should work to create momentum to abolish corsets,” and, “Let’s make a speech to the king on the need to ban the use of deceptive makeup.”

Elliott felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders as he began sorting the paperwork.

“Hmm, yes, I think we had quite a productive meeting today. Now the problem has been resolved... Wait, what problem?”

Something was pulling at the back of Elliott’s mind. He tapped his forehead as he tried to think of what it might be.

“What was today’s meeting supposed to be about again?”

15: The Young Lady Shops

Looking up from her novel, a blank space on the wall suddenly caught Rachel’s attention.

“It’s a little drab...”

Her family’s mansion had paintings and vases of flowers placed all

around it. Rachel's own room had been the same, with a portrait of her and a landscape painting or two that she liked.

"Hmm..."

Getting up from her sofa, Rachel looked around. Obviously, the walls of the dungeon were made of nothing but piled stones, so they weren't much to look at. The mural she'd painted the other day was the one point of color.

"If I plan to live in this place, I really should decorate it to my liking. Is that not the most satisfying part of moving house?"

This wasn't something an ordinary prisoner would think.

"It would be fastest to have Sofia and the Black Cats of the Dark Night fetch me things, but I think I'd like to develop new trading partners in the hopes of finding some unique tastes I haven't seen before."

Rachel, a very abnormal prisoner indeed, clapped her hands as she pulled out her stationery set and began writing.



"Hey, Rachel," Prince Elliott called.

His arrogant voice made Rachel reluctantly look up from the magazine she was reading. "What is it, Your Highness? I'm trying to read, you know?"

Rachel realized that Elliott wasn't even looking in her direction. His eyes went over her head, to the opposite side of the prison.

"Was there always a painting there?" he asked.

The wall he was looking at bore a large framed painting, a beautiful riverside landscape with lilies in bloom.

"Oh my, Your Highness. Is your memory failing you at such a young age?" Rachel said with concern.

"Wha?! No, it's not! Oh, but now that you mention it..."

"I put that one up yesterday," Rachel explained. "To think you would be unable to recall such a recent change."

"So you did bring it in recently, then?!" Elliott shouted, clinging to the bars with a scowl. "Hey, you must have it awfully easy if you're bringing paintings in here. What is this, some attempt to show off that you even have these sorts of non-essentials prepared?!"

"That wasn't my intention. I didn't bring the painting from home, after all."

Elliott turned to George and asked him, "Is that true?"

"Well, I've certainly never seen it around the house..." George replied. Not even he could tell where it had come from.

"Where did you pick it up?" Elliott asked Rachel.

"Are you stupid, Your Highness? Where would I be able to walk around and pick things up?"

“You’ve got a point...” The fact that Elliott accidentally missed being asked if he was stupid only went to show how much of an idiot he was. “You didn’t bring it from home, and you didn’t pick it up. Where did you get it, then?”

How had this painting just appeared?

As Elliott continued to ponder the situation, Rachel, eyes still on her magazine, casually replied, “I bought it.”

“Where does a prisoner buy things?!” Elliott questioned.

“Hey, Your Highness,” called Sykes, who’d been watching quietly all this time. He pointed at the magazine that Rachel was reading. “That literary magazine, it came out just this week.”

“What?!”

Although the recent increase in publishing companies had led to a rapid growth in books for entertainment, these sorts of magazines only came out when they’d amassed enough material, so their schedule was always irregular. None came out so often that it was impossible to tell one volume from the next. If Sykes could recognize it at a distance, then it must really have come out recently.

“Hey, Rachel! Where’d you get a new magazine from?!” Elliott barked.

“Now, why do you think I would ever tell you that? Everyone knows that this sort of entertainment spontaneously appears in a dungeon without the jailer knowing how.”

“As if I’d believe anything so patently absurd!”



“Something’s not right. Damn that Rachel. She’s been bringing new things in there somehow.”

Elliott’s grumbling was entirely justified. Rachel couldn’t go out, and he’d found no records at the gate that indicated any suspicious persons or purveyors to the ducal household had entered.

“What if there’s a spot where the wall opens up, and Miss Rachel’s been going out on shopping trips?” Sykes suggested.

Elliott glared at Sykes. “There’s no secret passage there! We checked beforehand, and Rachel can’t have had the time to rig something up.”

It would have taken an incredible amount of time to dig an underground passage. Even if Rachel had gained advance knowledge that he would be breaking off their engagement, it still wouldn’t have been near enough time to build one.

“Then how do we account for my sister bringing things in?” George wondered.

George was entirely perplexed too. His sister had always been hard to figure out, but now that it had come this far, he had no idea

what she might pull.

“Anyway!” Elliott spat angrily, “I want a thorough check to see that nobody suspicious has been coming and going from the palace. Have the knights and gate guards do a detailed investigation on any visitors or merchants whose destination inside the palace seem suspicious.”

“Yes, sir!”



The head clerk of the Crown Company, a long-standing business that had been granted access to the palace for two decades now, checked to see that no one was watching and entered the rear gardens. Then he quietly descended the steps to the dungeon.

“Hello, and thank you for your business. I am with the Crown Company.”

Inside her cell, Rachel looked up from her book. “I’ve been waiting. No one saw you come in here, I hope?”

“No. Everything is fine. I was visiting the rooms of the court ladies to take their orders, so as long as I’m not seen here, I should be able to explain away anything.”

The experienced merchant began pulling items out of his pack that met the specifications of Rachel’s order.

“These are the items you ordered which had not arrived yet.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Thank you. Also, in regards to the foreign stained-glass lamp you mentioned... Here is our catalog. If you find one you like, I will have it for you within a week, so please make use of our services again.”

“Sure, I’ll take a look. Sorry for always troubling you like this.”

The old clerk rubbed his hands together and bowed his head, saying, “Oh, it’s no trouble at all! We would very much like to continue this relationship in the future too.”

“Yes, I’ll speak to my father about allowing you into the ducal house.”

“Please do!”

The merchant bowed obsequiously, pleased by Rachel’s lip service, took down her next order, and left.

Between bites of one of the newly arrived cookies from a well-known shop in the castle town, Rachel said to herself, “Knowing His Highness, I’m sure he’s investigating the merchants who suddenly started coming to the palace recently.”

When Rachel’s servants brought supplies into the prison, they also posed as merchants who’d been purveyors to the royal household for years. Rachel wouldn’t do anything that let that buffoon of a prince catch her, even when developing new trading partners. A long-

standing purveyor to the royal household like the Crown Company still wanted as many new noble clients as they could get. No merchant would be satisfied just from a royal warrant of appointment. Because of Rachel's position, major suppliers would be willing to take risks to do business with her, and they knew how to skirt around whatever rules were in place.

Having been born a prince, Elliott had no sense for this sort of thing.

"Although, I'm sure an ordinary daughter of a duke would have no idea what goes on inside the mind of a merchant either," the abnormal daughter of a duke said to herself as she listened to the approaching footsteps and pulled out the bottle of wine she'd prepared for the guard.

16: The Young Lady Does Charity Work

As Sykes was walking through the palace, a priest came along with a bunch of small children in tow.

"Hello, mister!"

"Hi there, kiddo!"

"Hey, old man!"

"Don't make me kill you, you brat."

Once the procession of children had passed, something suddenly occurred to Skyes.

Huh? What are a bunch of kids from the orphanage doing walking around inside the palace?

He turned to look back just in time to see the children disappearing through a door one after another—a door that was already familiar to him, leading to the dungeon Rachel was in.

"Hey, something's happening again..." Sykes murmured.



When they got the report from Sykes, Prince Elliott and the others leaped into action, rushing down the stairs to the dungeon. There they found...

"Once upon a time, there was a little country called the Flower Kingdom."

The children were sitting on the ground outside the bars, listening to Rachel as she read a picture book to them. Yes, inside a cold stone room lit only by the dim sunlight, a girl framed by mountains of wooden boxes and a mural of a great valley excitedly read stories to small children who listened intently. Between them were a set of iron bars.

"What is this scene I'm looking at?!" Elliott cried out despite

himself.

The children all turned to look at him, frowning and holding a finger to their lips to demand he be quiet.

Unconvinced, Elliott asked George, "Am I the bad guy here?" but George had no answer for him.

"It's like a warehouse at a slave market," Sykes casually remarked, an idle observation that earned him a scowl from Elliott.

If they were to go with that concept, then that would make Elliott the slave trader, Sykes his manager and bodyguard, and George the head clerk. Elliott would be the villain, and Rachel the tragic heroine. He could never accept a worthless story like that. Still, with no idea what they'd walked into, they had no way of coming to an answer on their own.

As the children booed them for interrupting their fun, George asked Rachel, "Sister, what exactly is going on here?"

Rachel looked like a saint as she cheerfully answered her foolish little brother's unenthusiastic question.

"Oh my, I never thought you'd ask. You see, I had been visiting the orphanage every week to do charity work. But with the situation I now find myself in, I've had no choice but to stop. It makes me so happy that the children came to visit me."

Her reply skillfully combined the question, "Have you even been watching your own sister?!" the criticism, "It's your fault I've been forced to stop doing charity, you know?!" and the reprimand, "You're forcing these innocent children to be so considerate!" None of them could say anything in response.

Ignoring them, Rachel turned back to the children with the smile of an affectionate mother and resumed reading.

"The Flower Kingdom had a prince. All of the girls loved him for his beautiful golden locks, but despite his dashing looks, the prince was rather dim, and also a hopeless womanizer.

"No matter how his servants chided him, he wouldn't study or work. And though people made fun of him for it, the cheating prince was always wandering from one girl to the next. He spent every day just chasing after girls and fooling around.

"The prince never worked. It really troubled all the servants. The servants and the people both looked at him coldly, but the girl-crazy prince never noticed.

"Finally, the angry people seized the prince. They gave him a piece of their minds, but he never learned.

"Realizing the prince was unable to see the error of his ways, even his servants gave up on him.

"Now, what will become of the prince?"

The bright-eyed children who'd been listening to Rachel all

answered, "Off with his head! Off with his head!"

Rachel smiled at their cheerful chant. "Yes, that's right. They dragged the prince into the plaza, and then off with his head! The bad prince was executed with the guillotine!"

"Yayyyyy!"

"Wait, whaaaaat?!" Elliott exclaimed. He interposed himself between the children and Rachel, who was giving him a blank look from the other side of the bars. "What kind of book are you reading to them?!"

"Was there something strange about it?" Rachel asked.

"What do you think *wasn't* strange about it?! It was way too dark! And I'm amazed you managed to find such a satirical book."

"Oh, my," Rachel said with a flawless smile. "Did something about the story hit home for you, Your Highness?"

"Urgh!"

Rachel, who knew exactly what she was doing, kept a smile plastered on her face, while the children, who didn't know what she was up to, looked at Rachel and Elliott dubiously. Elliott couldn't insult her while there were children who didn't understand the situation present, so he jabbed a quivering finger toward Rachel through the bars.

"Forget about me! That book is clearly a bad influence on their education! Don't you have anything better?!"

"Oh, but I was just reading them a very common story."

"A common story?! With all that talk of cheating and guillotines, that book's content isn't suitable for children, and you know it!"

Rachel turned over the book in her hands. From every angle, it looked like a picture book for children.

"It seems perfectly normal to me. It's a morality play, you know? I think this is precisely the sort of material that should be read to children."

"There's malice in your choice of book! It's blatantly obvious that the prince was supposed to be me!"

Rachel met Elliott's anger with a silly laugh. "Oh my, Your Highness, you were cheating on me? That does deserve the guillotine, yes."

"Why you brazen... This is all because you bullied Margaret! You should be ashamed of yourself, instead of unduly resenting me for it, you witch!"

The blood had rushed to Elliott's head, and he'd ended up shouting. Just as he realized what he'd done, he heard the children whispering.

"Who's this shouty guy? He's mean."

"He's kinda like the prince in the book, isn't he?"

"Oh, now that you mention it. The prince was blond too, right?"

"Is he cheating all the time?"

"Off with his head."

The children weren't trying to be cruel, but the fact that they were just saying what they really thought hurt Elliott all the more.

"Damn it! I'll have you know, I do work, okay?!" Elliott declared. "And I don't fool around!"

"What are you making excuses to children for?" Rachel questioned.

"Excuses?! It's the truth!"

"He sounds desperate," one of the children said.

"Is it going to be off with your head too, mister?" said another.

Elliott backed away, sensing that he was at a total disadvantage here. Besides, he couldn't go getting into arguments with children.

The children, who'd enjoyed the picture book, gathered around Rachel, squealing with glee as she gave them some large biscuits.

Why is the prisoner the one giving away snacks? Elliott wondered to himself dazedly.

No matter what he or his cohorts said, they couldn't win with the kids here. Elliott and the others decided to call it quits and come back later. They were the righteous ones here. They couldn't drive off a bunch of children just so they could go after Rachel.

Just as they were about to storm out in frustration, Rachel offered them the book.

"It would do you some good to read books like these, and practice being able to read them to others, you know?"

Elliott sensed the unspoken "Why don't *you* do some volunteer work?" but not wanting to be humiliated any further in front of the children, he snatched the book out of her hands and left the dungeon.

He complained all the way back to his office.

"Damn that Rachel! Everything she does is so spiteful! She didn't have to act like I never do any charity in front of the children..."

"Yeah, it's hard for you to yell at her with the kids there. You're always trying to make yourself look good, after all," Sykes added.

"Shut up!" Elliott screeched.

As Elliott punched Sykes, George looked at the picture book.

"I've never heard of a story like this. What country is it from?"

Flipping quickly through the pages, he looked at the colophon in the back.

Did you enjoy the story? For Prince E, with love. Story/Art by R.F.

"My sister wrote this thing herself..." George muttered.

"Damn it! 'A very common story,' my butt! It totally was satirizing me!"

The howling of a sore loser echoed through the rear gardens.

Chapter 4: Hello, Little Girl

17: The Girl Visits the Young Lady

The guard had gotten used to unusual visitors, but... *This one is different*, he thought.

A darling young girl with long red hair done up in pigtails had come to visit the prisoner in the dungeon. He'd seen the prince, spoiled noble brats, and delivery guys, but this was the first time a girl had come. Although, if you were to line them all up, maybe she was actually the least unusual of the bunch.

"I'm sorry, young lady, but this place is off-limits to anyone without business here," the guard started to say, thinking, *I know she's just going to force her way in*. But even as he opened his mouth, she raised a hand to stop him.

"I know! Please tell Miss Rachel that Margaret Poisson is here to see her!"

"Of course she doesn't listen..." the guard muttered.

"What? Well, get to it!"

I have one kid after another bossing me around, he thought as he accepted that he had no other choice and began descending the stairs to the dungeon.

Margaret followed with alacrity.

"Miss, you do know what it means when you ask me to go tell her something, right?"

"Yes? Now, get on with showing me the way, please!"

"Oh, for the love of... It never ends..."

When they reached the dungeon, Margaret ran to the bars and exclaimed, "Miss Rachel, it's Margaret! Long time no see!"

Some girl he didn't know was cheerfully greeting the prisoner first thing in the morning. That alone was enough to make the guard break into a cold sweat. He didn't know why, but lately his prisoner was a late riser. In fact, she was still in bed right now...and the girl was trying to force her to wake up.

He'd only known the prisoner for a short time, but that ridiculous young lady probably hated it when someone disrupted her routine. Although, since she was always the one in control of things, he'd never imagined it could happen. What *would* happen if someone forced her to wake up? Without realizing it, the guard started to edge away from the bars.

“Mnngh?” Contrary to his fears, Rachel woke up rather quietly. Poking her head out from under the down blanket, she rubbed her eyes, then sat up and looked at the girl calling her name.

“Miss Rachel! It’s me! Margaret!”

“Hm?”

Rachel stared at her for a little while, as if in a daze, but once her eyes focused, they snapped open and she jumped out of bed.

Margaret was energetically shaking the bars as she shouted, “Jeez! You’re finally awake?! You sleepyhead!”

Rachel ran right over.

Oh, she’s her friend, the guard thought, hopeful that he wouldn’t be criticized for letting her in here. He’d only let his guard down for an instant before it happened.



“Gwogh?!”

Rachel skillfully executed a flying knee strike through the bars and into Margaret’s solar plexus.

“Haaah?!” Margaret cried as she went flying. She rolled across the floor, thrashing about in agony. Considering that she was ignoring all the things she was hitting and instead just clutching her stomach, it must have hurt really bad.

“Wh-What was...that for...?”

As Margaret gasped for breath, Rachel came back to her senses.

“Oh, my apologies. You just have such an eminently knee-able belly.”

“What does that mean?!” Margaret shouted.

As Margaret gritted her teeth and finally sat up, Rachel excitedly explained, “No, I mean it, you know? That felt great! Like, you’ve got cheeks that are crying out to be slapped, and a butt that demands a good spanking. Your entire body is just screaming, ‘Abuse me!’ I’ve told myself for more than a decade that I really mustn’t lay a hand on people, but... Oh, I just couldn’t resist, and gave you the knee!”

Margaret, who was clutching her belly and convulsing violently, beckoned to the guard.

“Wh-What?” the guard asked as he hesitantly approached.

Margaret grabbed him powerfully by the lapels and said, “Hey, what is her problem?! The moment I meet her, *this* is how she greets me?! Is she really a noblewoman?! Even people in the slums who do that *for a living* can’t do it that smoothly!”

“Don’t ask me...” the guard murmured.

Had this redheaded girl grown up in the lower part of town? Her initial cheer seemed like a lie next to the harsh tone she used now.

“Is that really Rachel Ferguson, the duke’s daughter?!” Margaret questioned.

“I don’t know myself, but I’d guess so?” the guard replied.

As the guard and Margaret whispered back and forth, Rachel, who was still all hot and bothered, continued singing the girl’s praises.

“Oh, the more I look at you, the more amazed I get! A specimen like you comes around only once in a decade—no, two decades! No doubt about it. You have the talent to become a punching bag like no other!”

“What kind of talent is that?!” Margaret barked.

What a bizarre compliment.

Clinging to the bars, Rachel cutely begged Margaret, “Just ten times. Please, let me double slap you!”

“I wouldn’t let you do it once!”

What a bizarre request too.

“Fine, five then! Just five times!” Rachel bargained.

“Could you listen when I’m speaking?!”

The guard mumbled under his breath, “You’re a fine one to talk...”

During their exchange, Margaret had managed to rise to her feet, trembling like a newborn fawn.

All of a sudden, Rachel tilted her head to the side inquisitively, looking at Margaret’s face. “By the way...would I happen to have met you somewhere before?”

Now shaking with rage, Margaret waved the guard over.

“Wh-What?”

The guard hesitantly approached, and Margaret again seized him by the lapels. “What is *with* that woman?! How does she not know me?!”

“Uh, I don’t know you either...”

“Setting that aside... No, it’s weird setting that aside, isn’t it? She thinks this is the first time we’ve met, and she lands a body blow on me before we’ve said a word?! What’s wrong with her?!”

“I told you not to ask me...”

Rachel, meanwhile, began negotiating terms in a coaxing voice. “Hey, I’ll buy you something you want, so, please, let me punch you?”

“Don’t say that like it’s no different from, ‘Let me touch you!’ Who would let you punch them?!” Margaret countered.

“Fair enough. How about a sharp slap instead, then? That should be fine, right? I can enjoy the sensation of my open palm on your soft cheek. You really get me!”

“No, and I don’t want to! Who let this nutcase run loose all this time?” Having fully regained her footing, Margaret leveled a finger at Rachel. “I don’t know if you’ve really forgotten me, or you’re just putting on a show, but your life’s looking dark from here on out! If you’re going to admit to everything and apologize to Prince Elliott, now’s the time, you know? That’s all I came to say!”

On the other side of the bars, Rachel cocked her head to the side again. “Apologize? Should I say, ‘I’m sorry for using you as a punching bag?’”

“Somebody!” Margaret yelled. “Somebody call the guards! We’ve got a psycho in here!”

“Uh, the young lady’s already behind bars, miss,” the guard noted.

While keeping a respectful distance from the bars, Margaret shouted at Rachel, “Hmph! If that’s the attitude you’re going to take, we’re done here! You’d better not underestimate me, the woman who’ll be Prince Elliott’s queen, got it?! It’ll be too late for regrets later!”

Rachel and the guard watched as Margaret stomped out of the room. When she was out of sight, Rachel asked the guard, “So, who was she supposed to be, exactly?”

“She said she was going to be queen, so she’s probably someone involved with the prince, right?”

“I feel as though I’ve seen her somewhere before...and the name does ring a bell.”

Rachel tried to remember but apparently couldn’t. It didn’t take long for her mind to move on to something else, and she stared in the direction the redheaded girl had vanished.

“Oh, but more importantly, I want to give those cheeks a slap. She’s got me all fired up, like those times I got into fights as a little kid. But for now, His Highness will do. Do you think he’ll let me slap him?”

“The guy you’ve chosen as a replacement is a little too much of a big shot, isn’t he?” the guard ventured.

“Oh? He’s no big deal. I nearly drowned him in the pond once.”

“Nearly drowned him... The prince?!” the guard asked in shock, but he received no response. When he turned to look at Rachel, she’d returned to bed and put her sleep mask back on. “You just woke up and you’re already going back to sleep?”

“Yes. I’d like to drift off to dreamland before I forget this wonderful feeling.”

“You really enjoyed that, huh? I dunno who that girl was, but this was some bad luck for her.”

Elliott’s most beloved, the one all his hangers-on also adored, Margaret Poisson, came to visit him in his office. The moment she arrived, she sneezed.

“What’s wrong, Margaret? Are you ill?” Elliott asked.

“No, I don’t think that’s it. I just have the chills for some reason.”

“Oh, okay. What a coincidence. I do too.”

18: The Duke is Confused by the Situation

Their daughter might have been thrown in prison, but things at the Ferguson home were as busy as ever. Normally, when one of your relatives was branded a criminal, you showed restraint in everything you did, even if you were a noble. In Rachel’s case, however, it was an arbitrary condemnation from the prince, and the ducal family didn’t recognize the crime. The king hadn’t rendered his final judgment yet, so the house was actually abuzz with activity, as if they were doing it to back up their claim that the charges were false.

The eldest son, George, was on the prince’s side, but right now his father Dan was still the head of the household. No matter what his son said, he wouldn’t back down on this. And for that reason, the house was inundated daily with guests and reports.

Finding a momentary break in all of the commotion, Rachel's maid Sofia entered the duke's office. Two maids were with her and waiting in the hall, like on the day Rachel was imprisoned.

Sofia stepped forward, giving a bow so pretty it seemed to have come straight out of the manual. "Excuse me, Master. I am here to speak about the young mistress."

"Oh, you have an update on Rachel?" the duke asked. He stopped signing documents and looked at his daughter's servant. Technically, all of the female servants reported to his wife, but he got the sense that the ones assigned to his daughter were loyal exclusively to her.

Whether she knew about how conflicted the duke was about this, Sofia's face remained impassive as she nodded and answered, "Yes."

"Well, how is she?"

"The reports say she is doing well."

With her own report concluded, Sofia bowed.

The duke stared at the whorl of her hair for a good ten seconds. "That's all...?" he asked, disappointed, as he realized no more was forthcoming.

Sofia nodded seriously. "Yes, if I boil it down to the essentials."

"No, no, no! That leaves out way too much. It doesn't tell me anything."

"I would think it tells you that the young mistress is doing well."

"And that's all! Nothing more! If you have more details, give me them."

"Ah. Then I will have them delivered to you later."

Sofia, who seemed unconvinced this was necessary, then turned to one of the maids behind her. "Lisa, bring the daily reports from the watchers to the master."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Meia, call in Dr. Monton, and tell him it is urgent."

"Yes, ma'am. Which one? The master heart surgeon? Or the young specialist of psychosomatic medicine?"

"Why are you saying something so silly? The master will be reading the records of the young mistress's activities. You should call both, obviously. Use some common sense."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Once she was finished giving orders, Sofia turned back to the duke. "Master, please read the daily reports while you are lying down in bed, and at a time when your heart rate is stable."

As he listened to the maids talk, one thing stuck out to the duke. *What does she mean, 'common sense'?*

When he returned to himself, the duke cleared his throat loudly and said, "Wait. If Rachel is doing well, then that's fine. I can't afford to collapse now."

What she'd been doing, and what the results had been... With so much happening in real time, it would definitely be better for his mental state not to hear about it. With that in mind, the duke ended the conversation. It was a matter of priorities, really—and absolutely not because he wanted to put off opening up that Pandora's box. No, really.

Clearing his throat once more in an attempt to dispel the awkwardness, the duke decided to consult his daughter's maid about something that was concerning him.

"Ah, more importantly, I wanted to ask... His Majesty should be returning from his trip soon. When he does, we'll have to settle things with His Highness in front of him. I need to prepare for that now, so..." He meant to follow that up by asking, "Do you have any opinion on what should be done?" but before he could, Sofia interrupted him.

"His Majesty will not be returning for some time."

"Come again?"

How was a mere maid, who couldn't have known the schedule for the royal inspections, able to gain that information?

As the duke stared at her, unable to comprehend what she'd just said, Sofia explained in a disinterested tone, "The young mistress was engaged to Prince Elliott at the insistence of Her Majesty, the queen. As such, I sent a report concerning the broken engagement and the events leading up to it to Their Majesties by way of some connections in the house of Count Naumann, who they will be visiting."

"When did you...?" the duke murmured. Not only did Sofia know the schedule, she even knew the routes they would be taking. On top of that, she was able to contact them out in the field. What the hell? That was terrifying.

"I also included a note that said, 'The cat is playing,' so the royal entourage has stopped at the Fracker Hot Springs in the count's domain and has not moved since. I believe they will not be returning to the capital until they can sort out the situation and decide on a policy."

Having said all that without any expression on her face, something seemed to occur to Sofia, and she added, "Or perhaps they are waiting until the young mistress is finished blowing off steam so that they do not get caught in the crossfire."

The duke laughed at her suggestion. It felt a little hollow, though. "N-No... Surely, no matter how far Rachel goes, the flames wouldn't reach Their Majesties. To suggest they'd be afraid of getting caught in the crossfire... It's absurd! Ha ha ha..."

"But it is a matter of fact that the grand duke has already..." Sofia paused. "Pardon me, I said nothing."

"The grand duke?! What happened to the grand duke?! Are you

talking about Grand Duke Vivaldi?!”

“Please, do not worry about it. It is already over.”

“I’m super worried, though?! What did Rachel do?!” the duke asked in alarm.

“Everything is all right. It was nothing major.”

“You’re sure about that?! What on earth did Rachel do?!”

“I am afraid I cannot be the one to say...”

“This isn’t sounding ‘all right’ at all, you know?!”

“Incidentally, Master...” As the duke was already falling into a state of panic, for no apparent reason, Sofia handed him a brochure. “You seem stressed. Might I suggest a hot springs trip with your wife?”

“Whose fault do you think that is? And in these circumstances?!”

“Yes. There are times you might just so happen to run into Their Majesties while on a purely coincidental hot springs trip.”

It suddenly hit the duke what Sofia was getting at. “Are you saying I should leave the scene and come up with remedial measures?”

“It is a coincidence. Mere happenstance.” With an inscrutable expression, Sofia continued, “After all, no one in the palace knows that the king has deviated from his schedule yet. If you were to leave for the same hot springs right now, no one could predict that you would happen across Their Majesties.”

Just how much does my daughter have going on under the table? It may have been a little late in coming, but a chill ran down the duke’s spine. My daughter is rapidly developing in ways I never hoped for. Somebody save me.

Sofia’s proposal was a brilliant move for saving Rachel. If the palace wasn’t aware of it, then that incompetent prince and his cronies would never even think the king’s return might be delayed. They couldn’t have planned for the duke meeting him along the road. Still, before he danced to his daughter’s tune, there was something he needed to check.

“What do you plan to do about our situation? If we’re not here, George will have full control of the house, you realize?”

Without the duke and duchess, control would naturally fall to the eldest son and heir, which was George. That being the case, Rachel wouldn’t be able to count on any support from the ducal house itself. But if she was suggesting that they take a long trip, Rachel had no doubt already accounted for that.

Sofia must have anticipated the question, because she was unfazed as she answered, “As a matter of fact, there are times when you not being around is more convenient.”

“By which you mean?”

“If you are only leaving for a short trip, it would not be unusual if you did not name a representative to act in your absence. If none of your relatives are named as representative, and the young master is still a minor, then who does management of the household fall to?”

The duke and the maid looked into each other’s eyes...then slowly swiveled to look at the butler standing by the wall. He suddenly looked like he was having a heart attack and scattered the papers he was holding all over the place, but...no matter.

“I see...” the duke mused.

“Yes. He may be a servant, but if entrusted with full authority by the master...”

“He can’t deviate from my policy, and George can’t order him around.”

“No matter what the young master says,” Sofia continued, “it can be dealt with by saying, ‘That contradicts your father’s instructions,’ or, ‘Please check with the master.’ And the young master’s limited talents will make registering a complaint with you while you are away difficult.”

“Yeah, this is how you do a bureaucratic response,” the duke said.

The master and the servants smiled darkly, all of their problems solved. But the butler, who looked ready to cry, asked, “Excuse me, but do I really have to handle him all by myself?”

“Have no fears, Jonathan. You have Sofia with you in the mansion, and if George gets out of hand, you can just tell Martha and she’ll chuck him in his room.”

The stern-faced head maid had been George’s wet nurse, and even though he was grown now, it was little trouble for her to pick him up by the scruff of the neck.

The suddenly elated duke left the butler to slump at the awful situation he found himself in and called for his wife.

“Iseria, we’re going on a hot springs trip, right now!”

“Oh, Dan! What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?! This isn’t the time!”

“Which is exactly why we’re going!”

“Huh?”



As he picked up the paperwork scattered across the floor, the butler cast a resentful look at the maid.

“If my heart gives out and I die from stress, my workers’ comp will be paid out, I hope?”

“Who can say? Please check with the master.”

19: The Girl Plans Ahead

A simple black carriage was returning to a district in the suburbs where the petty nobles' mansions were. With the jaunty clip-clop of cloven feet, it slid through the gate of a miniature mansion and stopped in front of the little entryway.

Hearing the neighing of the horses, the lady of the house and her maid hurried out to greet them. The only daughter of the baronial house, Margaret Poisson, had returned.

The coach driver dismounted and greeted the two of them, but before he could open the door—

“I’m hooooome!”

The pretty girl with her hair in a ponytail slammed the door open and jumped to the ground, landing with legs spread wide. She then topped it off by striking a dynamic pose.

As she was whispering, “Nailed it...” to herself, the old coach driver put away the steps that the girl who “looked like a noble’s daughter so long as she didn’t talk, ha ha” couldn’t be bothered to use.

“Young mistress, you’re going to hurt yourself one of these days. Please don’t do that.”

The “young mistress” didn’t care one whit for her coachman’s scolding. She tittered, “It’s fine! I hear something-or-others and important people don’t get hurt even when they fall from high places!”

Her “profound” response consisted of two sayings she’d only vaguely remembered mashed together. It just confused the coachman, but he decided it wasn’t worth pointing out. This young lady was one of those “something-or-others,” so telling her wasn’t going to help. Besides, she had too much energy for her own good, so he had the feeling she’d manage just fine even if she did fall from a high place.

Margaret’s mother called out to her, saying, “Welcome home, Margaret.”

“I’m home, mom!”

Her mother, Baroness Anita Poisson, hugged her. She had a delicate, ephemeral beauty that left you wondering how she ever gave birth to the little bundle of energy that was her daughter.

Next, the maid, who was as ill-mannered as her young mistress, loudly called out, “Young mistress! Welcome hooooome!”

“I’m home, Bennette!”

Margaret and the maid, who was of a similar build to her, high fived each other. “Woo-hoo!” they hollered in unison. It seemed like these two could have been blood relations.

Since the barony didn’t come with a domain, the baronial house of Poisson couldn’t afford many servants on the baron’s salary. The household consisted of the four people here, plus the baron. It gave

the place a homey atmosphere, and they treated the servants like family. The baron secretly prided himself on the comfortable home he'd built.

Once Margaret had been welcomed home in a way that seemed hardly proper for a noble house, she handed her bags to the maid and looked around.

"Where's dad?" she asked, peeking behind the curtain and the sideboard. In normal baronial houses, that was not where you'd find the head of the household.

The lady of the house smiled, though she looked somewhat troubled. "Your father hasn't returned from work yet," she answered.

"Grrr. I wanted to tell him all about how Elliott complimented me."

"Oh, my. Then tell me first, would you? It will be good practice for when you tell your dad, right?"

"Okay!"

With the dusk at their backs, Margaret wrapped herself around the baroness as they cheerfully went into the mansion together. The maid shut the gate behind the coachman as he took the carriage out again to go fetch the baron.

The little baronial house had a relaxed, harmonious air about it.



When Baron Poisson returned home from work, he asked the maid about his wife and daughter.

"Bennette, where are Anita and Margaret?"

The maid, who was about the same age as his daughter, took the baron's bags and snapped off a military-style salute. "They're in the living room, chatting and stuff."

"And stuff..." The baron had issues with the way she showed respect and her manner of speech, but right now he cared more about seeing his wife and daughter.

When the baron poked his head into the living room, mother and daughter were in the middle of a good conversation.

"Oh, I see. So it was a bad move, begging Prince Elliott for that bracelet!" Margaret exclaimed.

"That's right, Margaret. Don't do anything like that again, okay? You attract enough envy just because he adores you, so people could spread nasty rumors that you're taking advantage of his love and turning him into your personal wallet."

Margaret nodded. "I wouldn't want that!"

Her mother smiled. "That's right. You need to be more clever. You have to look at it longingly, as if you can't let it go, and make His Highness think, 'Oh, fine, I'll buy it,' but even when he offers, you

can't accept right away!"

"Really?!"

"You refuse, but let it show on your face that you wanted it and you're giving up. That will make you seem so lovable that His Highness will desperately want to give it to you as a present. You need to *make* men show you affection! Get them to give you things without demanding them. That's a first-class technique."

"I get it! I'm really learning here!"

Is it just me, or is their conversation kind of scary? the baron thought. He hesitated at the door to the living room, unable to join them for happy family time.

Baroness Anita was quick to notice. "Oh, darling. If you'd arrived home, you could have said so!"

"R-Right," the baron stuttered.

"I got so caught up with talking to Margaret. I'm sorry for not greeting you at the door."

"N-No, it's not a problem."

His wife immediately got up and started lovingly fussing over him.

"Welcome home, dad!" Margaret greeted him.

"Yeah. Welcome home to you too, Margaret."

"Listen, listen, you'll never guess what happened at the palace today!" Though she was already in her late teens, she wrapped herself around her father like she was a small child, telling him all about her day with a sparkle in her eyes.

"Come now, Margaret, your father is still in his outdoor clothes, you know?" the baroness said. "Save the talk for after dinner."

"But I wanted to let him know right awaaaay."

His wife and child started arguing over him.

Yeah. All that calculating stuff I heard them saying must have been my imagination.

"Hey now, you two. I'm famished," the baron interjected. "Let's hurry up and eat."

The baron had met his wife in somewhat of an indecent place, but she had an elegance that fit among the nobility, and her daughter was so attached to him that you'd never think she was a child from his wife's previous relationship. It was a happier family than a petty official like the baron could have ever hoped to aspire to.

What is there to doubt? This is a picture-perfect household.

Having convinced himself of that, the baron put a hand on his wife and daughter's backs and directed them toward the dining room.



Once dinner was over, Margaret retired to her room and opened

up a window to gaze into the dark of night. There were no decent streetlights in the area, so it wasn't all that pretty, but the slight breeze felt good on her cheeks. This was the time when she was most able to relax.

As she stared into space, Margaret thought back to what happened earlier.

"I never would have taken Rachel for such a psycho..."

She'd gone down to the dungeon to encourage Prince Elliott's *ex-fiancée* to admit defeat, but she'd never expected her to get violent like that. Sure, Margaret could have foreseen the verbal abuse, or perhaps even a scratch or slap, but in what world was there a well-to-do young lady who landed a flying knee strike on you before you so much as talked?

"And the inside of her head's even more screwed up than the things she does."

Even when they'd talked, she hadn't been able to keep up with Rachel's ideas. She really had no idea what Rachel was thinking.

"What is *with* her? I can't understand why she'd lock herself inside the prison in the first place."

Anyone would probably feel the same way.



It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Margaret had almost no familiarity with Rachel Ferguson, but she was the crown prince's *fiancée*, so even the most minor of nobles like Margaret knew her face. Her impression of Rachel up until this point had been that she was like a pretty doll. Rachel stood diagonally behind Prince Elliott during ceremonies as people squealed over him, and...didn't really do much of anything. Elliott barely spoke to her, and unless he did, she was just part of the scenery. She didn't join him in entertaining everybody, nor did she actively go off and do her own thing.

Since getting closer to Elliott, Margaret had subtly asked about Rachel, but the prince's understanding of her had been about the same as Margaret's. Still, even if Rachel had minimal presence and was just part of the scenery, the fact had remained that she was officially Elliott's *fiancée*, not to mention the daughter of the ducal house that stood at the apex of the nobility. There was no shortage of girls like Margaret who were after the shining prince, but if you looked at their spec sheets for lineage, history, and education, Rachel was second to none. None of the marquesses' and counts' daughters, or any other well-to-do young ladies who tried to use their social stature to mount an attack on Elliott, had been able to capture the target of their affections. Appealing to Elliott wasn't enough to defeat Rachel, who

outclassed them in everything.

And Margaret was the lowest kind of noble—a baron's daughter. Surrounded by all these girls from good lineages, Margaret had started off with too large a handicap. But thanks to her downtown upbringing, she'd pushed—physically—most other girls aside and gotten Elliott's attention.

Then, to top it off, she'd shown a spirit of consideration that those cloistered noble girls could never manage, earning her the affections of not just Elliott, but all of the rich, eligible young bachelors around him. This had set her apart from her rivals, but...that was it. If all she had was Elliott's love, and she couldn't upset the overwhelmingly high score Rachel had in everything else, there was no point in fighting over second place.

Well, what was to be done?

Margaret was confident Elliott loved her more than Rachel. If the prince were free to choose his partner, he would have undoubtedly chosen Margaret.

That had given her an idea.

Doesn't Elliott just need a justifiable reason to break off his engagement with Rachel? she'd thought.

If she couldn't rise to Rachel's level, she could drag her down to hers.

If she couldn't get ahead of her opponent in this race, she had to make the other girl trip.

If she could do that, she could pass Rachel while she was down and take the lead.

That had been the idea.

Margaret had tried reporting all the bullying she'd received from her rivals to Elliott as if Rachel had been the culprit. With her rough upbringing, the harassment from a bunch of well-to-do girls was malicious, but it wasn't anything Margaret couldn't handle. She'd put this to good use, crying about all the things they'd done to her, and a bunch of extra stuff that they hadn't. And, wow, what an effect it had had. Elliott and his associates had all been enraged by the horrible things Margaret had suffered, and they'd shown her sympathy.

That unlovable Rachel is bullying our adorable Margaret out of jealousy.

Once that idea had set in, some started to say Rachel wasn't suited to be Elliott's wife. The voices that said Margaret was more suitable grew louder. Finally, they concluded that their angelic Margaret should be queen. And after a lot of thought by Elliott, George, and the others, they'd decided on publicly condemning Rachel at the party.

That was supposed to be the end of it...



“No, seriously, what is she thinking?” Margaret wondered.

Even when she thought about it with a clear head, that woman was absurd. She was supposed to be suddenly jailed, but she’d stocked up food and other supplies inside the dungeon and had shut herself up in there—a place anyone would want to get out of—and toyed with the prince.

“Besides, if she knew it was coming, why didn’t she do something to prevent it in the first place?”

Margaret, who relied more on common sense, racked her brains over it because she couldn’t understand.

“And she was acting like she seriously didn’t know my face.”

Margaret had been all over Prince Elliott for at least half a year now, so how had Rachel seen that but not bothered to learn her name or face? In truth, when Rachel wasn’t interested in something, she completely ignored it. Even if the prince she cared nothing for had another woman on the side, she didn’t feel the need to remember her face. However, not knowing this, Margaret came to a different, incorrect answer.

“What if there’s something wrong with Rachel’s head?”

There was a whole lot wrong up there outside of just Rachel’s memory, mainly with her thought processes.

Margaret bit her nails as she stared into the darkness. “Anyway, if she won’t give up on Prince Elliott, that leaves me with no place to go, damn it.”

Margaret had interpreted the way Rachel kept secretly screwing with Elliott and the others as evidence of her continued fixation on him. Margaret was dead wrong.

“No matter how I look at it, I don’t think Elliott’s affections will turn to Rachel. Hmph. Well, it’s not like I don’t understand why she can’t give him up. I mean, Prince Elliott is *just so cool!*”

Margaret was demonstrating some serious blindness.

“Oh, a super cool, honest-to-goodness prince is smitten with me... Wow! I just can’t get over that!”

This was Margaret, age sixteen, writhing with glee as she gushed about her crush in private.

“Hee hee, Prince Elliott’s so *hot*, and *tall*, and he’s a bit of a bad boy too. But despite that, he’s *super* nice to me! Oh, just imagining Prince Elliott’s sweet smile is giving me a nosebleed.”

More than his position, more than his money, Margaret wanted him for his dashing good looks.

Having disappeared into her own fantasy land, Margaret clenched her fists as she tried to get her mind back on track. “It’s fine. No

matter how Rachel struggles, she can't change what's already in motion at this point. Prince Elliott and I are the palace's most eligible couple! This is common sense! And I'm gonna make it a fait accompli by the time the king gets back."

Even if the king preferred Rachel, if everyone around him were working to bring Elliott and Margaret together, His Majesty wouldn't be able to insist on things going back to how they were. That was their goal, at least.

"If Rachel tries to recover, there'll be nothing she can do. I mean, she's in prison. If she wants to enact some scheme in the palace, she can't do it when she can't leave her cell."

Or so Margaret thought. Why did new furniture constantly appear in Rachel's cell if she was supposedly stuck in there, unable to move? Margaret didn't understand what it meant that Rachel was constantly restocking, nor did she understand the problem that presented.

Unaware of the holes in her reasoning, Margaret stopped thinking, and a goofy grin spread across her face.

"Besides, Prince Elliott is so into me. No matter what Rachel does to get his attention, she's already beaten."

Margaret never doubted that Rachel was after Elliott. Perhaps this ability to convince herself of things so wholly was Margaret's strength, though it was also her weakness.

"After all, Prince Elliott will never fall for her. And you know why that is?!" Looking up at the cloudy sky, Margaret let out a triumphant laugh. "Because Prince Elliott has *me*! There's no room for you with the ultimate super beauty Margaret around! Okay, I'll admit, you've got a pretty face, sure. But there's no prize for second place! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Shut up! Is that the idiot daughter of the Poissons again?! Do you have any idea what time it is?!"

"Sorryyyyyy!"

The neighbor's loud shouting had pointed out that she had not, in fact, disappeared into "her own world." Margaret apologized, shut the window, and lowered her voice...then went back to boasting.

"Heh heh heh... I'm the one who's going to make Prince Elliott hers! And to make it a sure thing, I'm going to make Rachel admit defeat before Prince Elliott's dad gets home, okay?"

She'd heard Elliott was doing a variety of things to try and harass Rachel, but it didn't seem to be going well. Could it be that because the prince wasn't used to this sort of thing, he was holding back, so it wasn't having enough of an effect on the impudent Rachel?

Well, in that case...

"Heh heh, it looks like it's time for me to put the techniques I learned downtown to full use."

Margaret wasn't proud of it. She really wasn't. But she'd won the war for Elliott's heart despite growing up in a bad part of town. She felt like she knew a thing or two more about how to break a well-to-do young lady than a guy with a good upbringing like Elliott did.

"Just you wait, Rachel. I'll get you in ways you'll never expect!"

As Margaret burst into another high-pitched laugh, she quickly covered her mouth, looking furtively out the window.



"Hey, mom, I was just a little noisy last night, and the neighbors got mad. I didn't wake you and dad, did I?"

"Oh, you did? Your father and I were sound asleep," Margaret's mother replied.

"You were that tired? You and dad both seemed so full of energy last night."

"Ah, well... You might say it was because we were so busy. We were working on making a little brother for you last night, so we were totally exhausted when we fell asleep."

"Huh? 'Making' a little brother?"

Margaret was surprisingly innocent.

20: The Duke Has an Audience with the King

The rustic yet tasteful scenery rolled past outside the window. Duke Ferguson looked out at the Fracker hot springs village as his carriage slowly made its way through a crowd of people.

"Oh, this is impressive. I should have expected as much, considering this is the biggest earner in Count Naumann's domain."

At first glance, the main road looked like any other country town, but there were shops lining the street and people walking everywhere. Most of them must have been staying long-term, because few carried anything to suggest they were travelers. The people walking around the carriage either looked like patrons relaxing at a health resort or tourists carrying less than you'd expect them to. Many of them were doing touristy things like window shopping or dining out.

This hot springs village was clearly a hit. The duke was impressed...but also suspicious.

"The scope of economic activity here seems rather large, but Count Naumann's tax statements suggested it was much smaller."

"Dan, you don't have time for work right now, remember?" the duchess chided her workaholic husband, reminding him of where his priorities ought to be right now. The big problem for today wasn't tax evasion, but their daughter's broken engagement.

Guards led the carriage carrying the odd couple into an area lined

with posh hotels for the upper class.



As the king was toweling his hair after relaxing in an open-air bath, his chamberlain came to inform him that he had a guest.

“Your Majesty, Duke and Duchess Ferguson have arrived from the capital. They came to the hot springs to rest and recuperate, and they heard that you were also staying here.”

“Did they? I’ll be right there. See them through to the living room.”

“Yes, sire.”

The king finished changing and headed to the living room of his suite. There sat his old friends, the duke and duchess—still in their traveling clothes—awaiting him. He responded magnanimously as they rushed to their feet and bowed their heads deeply, then he sat on the sofa at the head of the table and gestured for them to be seated.

“How good of you to come, Your Grace. Oh, but this is a rented lodging, not the royal palace. No one is watching us, so, please, relax.”

“Yes, sire. If you’ll excuse it,” the duke replied.

“Indeed. I am also here to relax, so there’s no need for us to stand on ceremony. Ah, you there, chamberlain. I’d like to hear the duke’s opinion on events in the capital, and I suspect our discussion will be lengthy, so see to it that no one enters this room unbidden.”

“Understood!” said the chamberlain, who’d arrived with the tea.

The king took a sip of the delicious iced tea that such hot springs towns were famous for. The duke and duchess sat across from him, drinking their own. Then the chamberlain departed the room with a bow.

The very moment the door closed, the duke yelled, “Hey, Robert, what the hell has that little shit of yours gotten us into?!” He then began to choke the most powerful man in the land.

“Wait, wait, calm down, Dan!” the king entreated.

“He’s right, Dan!” the duchess interjected. “I know how things are, but you can’t just go strangling His Majesty when we don’t know who might walk in!”

Oh, Duchess Iseria, are you saying it would be all right if you knew for sure that no one was coming?

The king was a little concerned by the duchess’s wording, but this wasn’t the time to get off track now.

After the king and the duchess chastised him, the duke let go of the king’s neck and backed off, though he still wasn’t satisfied. “I apologize. Thanks to a certain someone’s idiot son, I find myself worn down mentally and physically as of late. That was a little rude of me.”

“You throttle your king, yet you say it was just a ‘little’ rude?”

Now free from the duke's grasp, the king sat back down on the sofa.

"I've heard about the situation. Or rather, I read the report you sent me. I never thought my dolt of a son would do that. Listen, I earnestly apologize for what he did, at least."

"Honestly," the duke said, sighing, "that son of yours takes idiocy to new heights heretofore unseen. He's really messed up this time!"

"Listen, I'm allowed to say it myself, but are you really going to call him an idiot in front of me, his father, the king?"

"What else can I call him? It's the truth!"

The king smiled, though it looked strained, and took a sip from his glass as his childhood friend vented at him, his nostrils flaring.

More than twenty years ago, the king and the duke had a relationship not unlike Prince Elliott and George's relationship now. Albeit, they were never so stupid—as far as they knew. The two of them had been playing and learning together since before they were ten years old, so it was fair to say that after such a long friendship, their relationship was as relaxed as could be.

Because of their parents' friendship, Elliott and Rachel should have been an ideal coupling because it would have the least impact on the political world's factional dynamics. But who could have known that one of them would discover "true love" and break the engagement of their own accord?

"Still, what are we to do?" the king wondered aloud.

"I'm thinking we could start with you and your son getting down on your hands and knees and apologizing," the duke stated.

"I'm not interested in helping you blow off steam right now. I'm concerned that since Elliott did this so publicly, he must have shaken up high society considerably."

As the king looked to Iseria, her brow furrowed. With a forced smile, she said, "Every middle- to low-ranking noble with a daughter is in a tizzy, thinking that they might just have a shot now. Not only did he break off his engagement, but the girl he's chosen instead is only the daughter of a baron by marriage."

Rachel was, without question, at the very top of the hierarchy among the young ladies in her and Elliott's age group. Meanwhile, Margaret Poisson, whom Elliott was so taken with, was likely at the bottom in terms of bloodline and career. If the lowest of them was able to shove aside the highest-ranking lady and take the victory for herself... Well, in a certain card game, that resulted in what was called a "revolution."

Therefore, it was only natural that the other noble young ladies would think that if such an unbelievable reversal was possible, then maybe they could pull it off too. Margaret had managed it, so of

course they would think they could.

Parents who'd had no expectation of seeing their children move up in the world were now incredibly excited to have found a way for their daughters to turn it all around. They, and their children, would no doubt be making their pathetic attempts to catch Elliott's attention at this very moment.

"I see. And as for the higher nobles?" the king asked.

"It's just as you suspect," the duchess replied, understanding what the king was getting at. "The prince's unexpected idiocy has disturbed the order of things for the next generation, so they are pretty shaken up and about to start panicking."

Iseria was not mincing words. Dan, on the other hand, didn't even try to mask his outright insults.

"And the oversized piece of trash you call your son doesn't understand even that much. Robert, unless you live long enough for the rule to skip a generation, the moment that moron takes the throne, the powerful nobles will revolt and there will be a mass exodus from the country."

The fact of the matter was that the duke's prediction had enough truth to it that it couldn't be laughed off.

It went without saying that the nobility's upper crust would've liked for their daughters to replace Rachel too. They'd always had some chance of pulling it off, so unlike the second- and third-rate nobles, who were falling over one another to try it now, they'd no doubt come up with much more realistic plans. But in the end, they'd decided that whatever benefits they might gain from their daughters becoming queen were not great enough to outweigh the losses they'd suffer from the destabilization of society.

If Elliott had moved forward with his plans in secret, keeping the details private, that would have been one thing. But, no, he'd revealed it all in front of who knows how many people, plunging high society into chaos. In exchange for the sway they had with the royal house, the upper nobility had a responsibility to support their addle-brained prince by restoring order. However, since the king was still around, he might have crushed them for getting too greedy before Elliott could take the throne. No noble who could properly analyze risk and benefit would want to join the battle at this point.

Still, while that was true for the noble houses, many of their daughters were still out there trying to seduce Elliott, the same as the lower nobles. That didn't matter so much right now, though.

After the duke explained the situation, the king gave him a sardonic smile. "Dan, there's a hole in your plan."

"What might that be?"

The king thrust a finger in his childhood friend's face. "You're

suggesting we bet on the next generation, but...there's no guarantee Elliott's children will be any better, you know?"

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right. I mean, they'll be *your* grandchildren, after all," the duke replied, nodding at the king's self-effacing joke.

"By the way, what are young Rachel's thoughts on the matter?" the king asked. "The covert letter you sent me suggested that she was actually happy about it." The king produced an envelope from the letter box on the side table.

Frowning, the duke answered, "Yeah, she's enjoying herself so much in prison that even I, her father, am a little disturbed by it. The way she predicted all this and prepared so well is scary."

"Is it that bad? Could you give me an example?"

The duke pointed at the letter. "I didn't send you that."

"This wasn't from you?"

"Right," the duke confirmed with a slow nod. Then he explained it all as best he could.

"A dark organization Rachel commands sniffed out the brat's conspiracy; carried a vast quantity of supplies into the palace dungeon; contacted Rachel *after* her imprisonment to determine their policy going forward; and investigated your travel schedule, something which I had no way of knowing. They are, at all times, keeping tabs on your current location. One of their agents delivered a letter to you at that location; arranged for you to stay here when you stopped traveling; and sent me to find some way to resolve the situation, since it was anticipated that you wouldn't return to the capital."

The king listened to all of this in silence.

As if just remembering, the duke added, "And, by the way, I only learned of this organization the night that Rachel was thrown into prison, and only because they casually revealed their own existence to me." He took a sip of tea to wet his throat. "I don't know who or where their agents are. I know that three of Rachel's maids are involved, but if it were only the servants in my household, they wouldn't have been able to investigate outside the capital. To be frank, I suspect that Rachel may have even more people at her disposal than the ducal house itself does."

Once the duke finished speaking, the king, who'd pressed his hand to his forehead, stirred.

"Hey... Don't you think that, maybe, we might be better off executing Rachel, when you consider the future?"

"As a public servant, there's some part of that that I have to agree with, but as her father, I firmly reject it. Also, as a member of your administration, in the interest of safety, I cannot permit it."

"In the interest of safety?"

The duke looked the king straight in the eye, fully aware that he was being disrespectful.

“Robert, think about it. There’s an organization out there that can do all this, and we don’t have a proper grasp on them, okay? What if, after Rachel died, they were to go underground and seek revenge? What could you even do?”

“And they’ve already managed to carry a large amount of supplies into the castle at least once...” The king turned the letter box over and dumped the rest of the letters onto the table. Most of them were urgent reports from the palace or government offices. “I have to envy their talent. My people in the palace have nothing on young Rachel’s subordinates. All they’ve done is report Elliott’s lunacy and ask me what to do.”

“Maybe it’s not that Rachel’s people are supremely talented, but that the courtiers are simply too unreliable?”

“That’s part of it. And every department is sending me the same reports separately. I’m going to need to reform things when I get back.”

“That can wait for now. How are we going to contain this incident? We have to hurry and stop that pea-brained prince. I mean, I won’t say you should just up and hang him, but I do think it would be for the best!”

Unlike the duke, the king remained calm, gazing silently out the window before he said, “You know what... Let’s assume we’ll discuss all that at length. Dan, for now, go drop off your things and relax. This hotel’s open-air bath is spacious and feels wonderful.”

Realizing that his friend was suddenly dodging the subject, Dan narrowed his eyes and decided to poke fun at him.

“I know you. I bet you swam in it.”

“I could never do something so rude as to *not* swim in such a large hot spring.”

“Setting aside our difference in opinion, please consider your position and show some restraint, *Your Majesty*.”

The king sank into the sofa, looking exhausted. “I know Elliott’s stupidity got us into this mess, but... Dan, I don’t think we’ll be able to come up with remedial measures so easily. The way I see it, the situation is still on the move.”

“You’re saying Rachel is going to do something?”

“I suspect as much.” The king smiled at the duke, who’d gone silent. “Besides, I don’t know how I should say this, but...Rachel knows what she’s doing. Maybe she’s already thought up a way to settle things.”

It had obviously never occurred to the king that Rachel meant to stay shut up in there for as long as possible.

“We need to take our time thinking and find the optimal solution that she’s looking for,” the king concluded.

The duke looked at him as if he wanted to say, “That sounds awfully timid.”

“By the way, Dan,” the king said casually, “It’s all well and good that you let your daughter’s servants send you here, but...did you make a reservation?”

“Huh? No... It’s my first time, and I don’t know any of the hotels. I thought I’d meet with you and then go looking.”

“I see.” The king gently laid his glass on the table. “When we arrived here, my chamberlain went to talk to the manager about reserving the most luxurious hotel in town for our personal use, but...there was already a reservation for the party of ‘an individual of significant status.’ The inn was otherwise vacant. That other reservation, it was for you.”

The three of them fell silent.

After some time, the duke mumbled, “This is why I was against Rachel marrying that stupid prince.”

“That can’t be what caused her to grow up so warped,” the king remarked.

“No...” The duke picked up the report from the pile of letters on the table. “From the way they talked, they only started operating after her engagement to that moron was a sure thing, you know?”

“Did she predict their married life would go poorly, so she wanted to be able to stay on top?”

“That’s probably it. Oh, I should have said no, even though the queen was pushing hard for the engagement. Then Rachel would have stayed no more than a crazy noblewoman.”

“I think that’s still bad enough, though. By the way, what if I’d been the one pushing for it?”

“I’d have thrown *your* worthless orders in the trash and then forgotten all about them.”

“Is that really something you should say in my presence?” the king asked.

The duke threw the report down on the table in front of him, casting his eyes up to the ceiling. “Or maybe I should have stood back and watched as Rachel drowned that stupid prince back then.”

“You can’t just say that in front of me, his father. Besides, if that had ended with murder, even though she was still a young child, she wouldn’t have been able to evade the death sentence.”

The duke waved his hand weakly. “I know that. It’s a joke... At least twenty percent of it.”

“If you’re eighty percent serious, we call that being serious.”

As the king and the duke both fell silent, a cheery voice spoke up.

"I'm sorry I'm late. Oh, Iseria, it's been ages!"

The queen, wearing a bathrobe that matched the king's, belatedly came to join them in the living room. The duke and duchess rose to greet her, and she sat down next to the king.

"No, I really am sorry about this," she apologized.

"What was taking you?" asked the king.

"If they're going to give us such a large bath, the only polite thing to do is go for a swim in it, right?" the queen answered unabashedly. "I set myself a goal of twenty laps, so that's what was holding me up."

They're so alike, the duke and duchess both thought.

After they gave the queen a run-down of their earlier conversation, she immediately responded, "I still want Rachel as the next queen. I won't budge on that!"

"But it's just not possible after this. Rachel doesn't want it either," the duke explained.

"Well then, Duke, let me pose you a question," the queen said, sitting up straight. "Do you think he can run the country *without* Rachel?"

It was such a powerful argument that both the duke and the king went silent. The duchess politely looked away.

"I'm not hearing any objections, so I want you to come up with a plan to persuade Rachel that also maintains the minimum requirement of bringing her into the royal house, even if we have to satisfy some of her demands."

"You're being unreasonable..." the king began to argue, but the queen was having none of it.

"Unreasonable or not, it must be done. Can you laugh off the idea of the country falling to ruin just five years after you pass away?"

Both the king and the duke clutched their heads.

"Hey..." the duke said, "this is going to take a while, right? Why don't we take a bath?"

"It doesn't seem like you'll hit on a solution easily," Iseria added. "Let's go and get ourselves checked in, at least."

"Iseria, this hotel's main selling point is their aesthetic salon's slimming massage!" the queen said excitedly.

"My, how lovely!"

The four of them rose and went to escape from reality under the pretext of enjoying the hot springs resort.

21: The Young Lady Gets to Know the Girl

When Margaret arrived at the entrance to the prison, the guard was absent and no one was watching the place.

"Mr. Guard? Mr. Guard!" she called.

He still didn't appear.

"Huh...?"

Returning to a hallway where people were coming and going, she checked with one of the guards there and found out that because Rachel was the sole occupant of the prison, the prison guard only guarded it on a part-time basis. He was only there when he happened to come around on patrol.

"Oh, I seeee."

Politely thanking the guard, Margaret headed back to the prison.

"Hmm, it's not locked." Pushing open the iron door, Margaret grinned. She couldn't believe how well this was going. "How considerate of that stupid prison guard! Now I can harass her all I want without anyone around to stop me."

During Margaret's first visit the other day, Rachel had struck her in the gut when she least expected it, and Margaret had accidentally let the guard see what she was really like. She hadn't heard any rumors about it, though, so the guard must not have gone around talking about it.

"Still, if it happens repeatedly, he might say something to Prince Elliott or Sykes when they visit the prison. It's better that he's not around."

Margaret descended the stairs to the dungeon in high spirits. She was a stubborn woman. When someone got her, she made sure to get them right back.



Rachel had been up all night writing, so she'd just finished brunch consisting of potato potage, biscuits, and a fruit cocktail. She heard the footsteps of the latest guest coming down to the dungeon to help her kill some time, and she looked and saw it was Miss Punching Bag, who'd visited just the other day. Rachel had been wanting to see her again, so she was delighted.

"Oh, welcome, Miss Bag. I've been waiting for you to come visit again!"

"Huh?! It's good that I'm welcome, but... Miss Bag? Who's that?" Margaret furrowed her brow, checking behind her just in case someone else was there.

Rachel tilted her head to the side. "Huh? I mean you, of course, Miss Punching Bag."

"Me?! And what's with that name?!"

"Like I said, it refers to you. The one with the most punchable body in all the world, renowned as the 'beautiful punching bag,' Miss Punching Bag."

"What kind of life am I leading inside that twisted head of yours?!"

Has living in the dungeon warped your ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality?! What does a beautiful punching bag even look like?!"

Margaret kept shouting, her face twisted with rage as she jabbed a finger toward Rachel.

"Learn my name properly! I'm Margaret Poisson, daughter of the baronial house of Poisson! The woman who'll become queen in your place. The way you constantly bullied me made Elliott lose his affection for you! Well? Do you get it now? Do you understand the position you're in? You can cry and scream if you like. Go on, howl like the loser you are!"

Anyone watching would have thought that Margaret was the one howling right now.

Hmm. Rachel closed her eyes and thought. After a moment, she opened them again and flashed the indignant redhead a smile.

"Now, let's set all of those trivial details aside for the moment. Would you mind letting me punch you, just once?"

"It's not trivial, okay?! It's my name! And the prince's engagement!"

As Margaret stomped her feet angrily, Rachel mulled over how to explain this. She decided to just give it to Margaret straight.

"I'm not particularly interested."

"Well, get interested!" Margaret demanded. "This is why I hate high-born girls like you!"

"Forget all that. I'm fascinated by your soft, velvety skin, which would be satisfying to slap! And I'm *very* interested in your neck, which would spin really well if I landed a punch on your chin, and your belly, which would make a good sound if I gave it an uppercut!"

"Then how about learning my name, at least?!"

Blood rushing to her head, Margaret took a step closer to Rachel...and jumped to the side the very next instant. She barely made it before the lasso under her foot retreated back inside the prison.

"Tch!"

"That's dangerous! Don't just go setting traps like that!" Margaret yelled.

"I almost had you too. Your instincts are better than I expected."

It seemed like a contradiction for the prisoner to be the one trying to catch another person.

Margaret, who'd tripped and fallen as she jumped aside, rose to her feet and dusted herself off. "Heh, heh heh heh... That's right. It looks like I'd underestimated you. You were playing the role of some kind of silly sadist, but you were really trying to catch me so you could use me as a hostage, weren't you?"

"No? I want to capture you so that I can hit you and listen to your

lovely cries.”

As they each stared wordlessly at the other, a whirlwind blew past outside the ventilation window.

Margaret smiled cynically and shrugged. “You say that, but what you’re really planning is to take me hostage, then negotiate with Prince Elliott to have him release you and reinstate the engagement, right? I know it is.”

“Oh, no, I came to the prison of my own free will, and having my engagement to His Highness restored would be nothing short of a nightmare for me, so I would never ask for it. But...if I were negotiating conditions for *your* release, I think I would ask for custody of you.”

“Huh? What?”

As a question mark floated over Margaret’s head, Rachel pressed her hands against her cheeks and gazed at Margaret as if enraptured.

“It’s just as I said. In exchange for releasing you, I’d want you put in here with me, where I could do with you as I pleased.”

“Hold on... Your logic makes no sense,” Margaret said, struggling to understand.

Rachel sighed. “Well, considering I’ve failed to capture you, I won’t be able to make that exchange.”

“Oh, yeah! That’s right, I never got caught! Whew, I was worried!”

But just as Margaret let out a sigh of relief, she jumped and did a forward somersault, rolling across the stone floor. The lasso fell uselessly where she’d been standing.

“Tch!”

“Wh-Wh-Why you! Cut it out already!”



“Oh, right,” Rachel said, “Didn’t you have some business with me, Miss Punching Bag? I’m a busy woman, so I’m afraid I can’t spare much time for you.”

“Thanks to you, I completely forgot!” Margaret shouted. “I never had time to say it! And besides...how are you busy inside a jail cell?! Picking the lice out of your hair? Catching mice? To think the daughter of a duke would be reduced to fighting insects and mice. Ha ha ha, what a laugh! I’ve had my share of troubles with them, so it’s good to see a well-to-do girl like you get what’s coming to her!”

Margaret was of common birth and came from a poor family before her mother remarried into the baronial house, so she found the duke’s daughter’s fall from grace hilarious.

As Margaret clutched her sides, roaring with laughter, Rachel just gave her a blank look. “Um? There aren’t really any insects or mice in

here, you realize?"

"Huh?"

"Or perhaps it's simply that the insect repellent I have in here with me keeps them away."

"You don't get them? In a place like this?"

Rachel looked pityingly at Margaret. "Then...you do get bugs? In the Poisson household?"

"Don't look at me like that! It was a long time ago, okay?! Not our current house! Now they only show up occasionally!" In the middle of her deranged shouting, Margaret had a sudden flash of realization. "Wait! You do remember my family name after all?! You've been messing with me this whole time!"

"I did just hear it," Rachel said with a sincere smile, not apologetic in the slightest. "But, you know, it's not out of malice. We all like to call our close friends by pet names, don't we?"

"Listen you..."

Margaret picked up the prison guard's chair and threw it at Rachel with all her might. Obviously, it hit the bars and fell to the ground.

Margaret gazed up to the heavens and shouted, "Nobody calls someone a punching bag without malice!!!"

"Oh, my! It's a shame my sincerity hasn't gotten through to you..."

"Get a doctor to take your brain out, give it a thorough wash, and fix the parts that are broken!"

"Thank you ever so much for that novel suggestion. I will take it under advisement."

"You have no intention of fixing it at all!"





Just as she was about to snap, Margaret noticed a weight in her bag and remembered what she'd come here for.

"Oh, that's right! Thanks to you, I nearly forgot my reason for coming here." A smirk crossed her darling face as she laid the bag down on the ground. "Hee hee, today I've brought you a nice snack, since you're suffering down here in the dungeon without a proper diet."

Margaret put a mint sachet inside a towel that she'd pulled out of the bag, then used the towel to cover the bottom half of her face. She laughed at Rachel, her voice now muffled.

"Prince Elliott gave me some money, you see, and I went to buy fresh fruit at the marketplace. It's very nutritious and good for your health, I hear."

Next, Margaret put on thick gloves and produced an oddly shaped package that was tightly sealed.

"I had them pick out an especially ripe one for me. I'm sure it will do wonders for you, since you've been stuck underground in this dungeon, eating nothing but preserved foods."

Margaret cut into the package with a knife, pulling out the thing inside. An intense rotting smell quickly spread throughout the room and remained as Margaret revealed a spiky yellow object.

"It's a tropical fruit. A durian, they call it. It has a sliiightly strong odor, but that just tells you it's ripe. Hee hee, do enjoy the fresh fruit, will you?"

Margaret set the durian down on the guard's chair, out of Rachel's reach.

"It has a hard husk, so have Mr. Guard split it for you. I'll leave it here, so it doesn't disappear before then."

Margaret smirked beneath her mask as she looked at Rachel.

Prince Elliott is trying to make her submit. That's why he uses lukewarm methods that don't work. I'm just going to go all out with harassing her, whether Rachel apologizes or not. If she suffers, then good. If I just keep on hitting her without overthinking it, eventually she'll capitulate.

Rachel looked calmly at the durian. "Wow, this takes me back. I used to see them a long time ago, on trips overseas." She didn't cringe in the slightest as she looked at the stinking fruit with fascination.

"The smell...doesn't bother you?" Margaret asked.

"It smells a lot like rotting onions, doesn't it? The locals say they like that, though."

Margaret hadn't counted on Rachel being accustomed to it, and

she ground her teeth in vexation.

Rachel opened one of the wooden boxes in the back of the cell and dug through it, searching for something. "Let's see. I'm sure it was around here... Found it." Rachel returned holding a large can. "Lady Poisson, let me give you this as a token of appreciation."

"Huh? What is it?" The can Rachel was offering her seemed to be of foreign make.

"We had this one time when I went on a trip with His Highness, and he was quite fond of it. Although, I doubt he's ever seen it inside the can. Since I happen to have it handy, you can have it."

"Is it something unusual?" Margaret questioned.

"You won't see it often in this country."

"Hmm..."

It was apparently incredibly valuable. On top of that, it wasn't available domestically, and it was something that Prince Elliott liked.

Rachel sat the heavy can outside the bars and Margaret picked it up.

"I'll go open it up right away!"

"I'm glad you like it."



Margaret disappeared like the wind, leaving Rachel all alone.

"I knew I'd seen her somewhere before. So that was the girl latched onto His Highness like a suckerfish the night of the party."

Because Rachel had no interest in Elliott and only saw their broken engagement as a means to an end, she'd never troubled herself to check who Elliott's new partner was. Thinking about it now, that had been a careless mistake. Honestly, the key points of the story had been that Elliott was going to declare their engagement ended and that she'd then be thrown into prison, so everyone other than that buffoon of a prince had been completely inconsequential.

"Lady Margaret of the baronial house of Poisson... From the two times I've talked to her, I'd say she's a man-eater who alters her attitude depending on the gender of the person she's talking to. She has a simple side to her as well, letting her mask slip the moment she gets worked up. And given that she took a gift her target gave her seriously and brought it back with her, she's not a particularly deep thinker."

Rachel brought a hand to her chin, nodding. "To sum it all up, she's a short-sighted dimwit."

As Rachel was thinking to herself in the darkening dungeon, the light wavered and the guard came in.

"What?! Are you awake in there, Miss?! What's that awful smell?!" he asked.

When she saw the guard, who spoke to her like a close friend, Rachel smiled a little, relieved.

“The young lady who came to visit me earlier brought a present, but it seems to have gone off...”

As the prison guard came closer, he saw that the item in question had been left on his chair. He looked really unhappy.

“This thing reeks. How did they not notice when they brought it?! Which idiot was responsible for this?”

“It was Miss Punching Bag. The one who came the other day.”

“Oh, her...”

Oddly satisfied by that explanation, the guard wrapped a rag around the rotten—or so he assumed—durian and carried it out.

Once he'd left, Rachel put on the mask she'd used while painting and looked for the largest plank of wood she could find. She used it to fan as hard as she could, trying to ventilate the room.

Rachel had received rigorous lessons in order to prepare her to become the next queen. Her poker face was second to none.



Elliott was having tea in his office with his associates when Margaret came in carrying a large can.

“Prince Elliott, I got this as a gift. Could you open it?!”

“Margaret!”

When Elliott saw the girl he loved most in all the world had come to visit him, he rose to his feet, grinning. Then he saw the odd thing she was carrying.

“Hm? What's that?” he asked.

“She said it was something you enjoyed eating on one of your foreign trips!” Margaret replied.

“I ate it on a trip abroad? Hmm, what could it be?”

Elliott had been on several such trips, but there wasn't anything he'd eaten that he'd liked enough to remember it.

Taking the can in hand, George tried reading the label. “Let's see... It says soor... Stremming? Strumming? From the picture on the can, I think it's a fish dish of some sort...” He couldn't make heads or tails of the instructions.

Grabbing the swollen can from George, Sykes tapped on it lightly. “I've seen canned goods before, but I never knew some of them swelled up like this.”

None of them had any knowledge of fermentation.

“What kind of dish is it, Your Highness?” George asked.

“I haven't the foggiest...” Elliott replied. “In fact, this is actually my first time looking at a can so closely like this. I wonder what it is?” Sykes laughed at how perplexed they seemed. “We'll find out

when it's open. I'll bet my knife can cut through this lid."

"Oh, yeah? Okay, go ahead and open it," Elliott prompted.

Elliott, Margaret, and George watched as Sykes held the can down with his left hand and made a big swing with the knife in his right.

Suddenly, it occurred to Elliott to ask Margaret, "Who did you get it from?"

"Miss Rachel."

"Sykes! Wai—"

Just as Elliott was shouting for him to stop, Sykes's knife sank deep into the can.

Chapter 5: Memories of a Sister and Brother

22: The Maid Brings a Delivery to Her Master

“Listen, don’t let a single mouse through! We’re going to seal this place completely and force Rachel to give up!”

On Prince Elliott’s orders, knights were posted around the building that housed the dungeon. They went in shifts, a few at a time, and hid in the shadows to catch Rachel in the act of contacting the outside.

“No matter how you look at it,” Sykes informed the knights, “Rachel must be opening her cell to bring in fresh supplies. Nothing else can explain the new furniture. We’re going to catch whoever’s sneaking stuff in and make Rachel feel like she’s under siege.” Sykes deliberately said this so that Rachel could hear him too.

The plan was for the knights to hide in the bushes, where they could see either the entrance or the window, and catch unawares whoever came to meet Rachel. Seeing your lifeline vanish before your very eyes would have an impact on anyone, even Rachel.

“Honestly, they say there’s still no sign of action from the ducal house. What’s going on there?” Elliott grumbled irritably. Not only had the ducal house made no attempt to save Rachel, but the duke and duchess had left on vacation.

“Do they have any grasp of the situation?! Their daughter is in jail for a crime! Normally, you’d at least come to visit and bring her a snack!”

“Your Highness, it sounds like you want them to resupply my sister?” George pointed out. “Didn’t you want them to *not* intervene?”

“Obviously, I don’t want them delivering supplies to her,” Elliott replied, sounding annoyed, “but as her parents, they should want to bring her a cake, or something. What is the duke doing?!”

“Would you like me to have something delivered in my father’s name?”

“Yes, and then I’ll gobble it up as she watches.”

“Ah, so you *were* thinking of a way to harass her...” George muttered.

It wasn’t clear if Rachel had heard all the intentional ruckus they’d been making outside. She was under the covers, wearing her

sleeping mask, and breathing softly as she slept the day away again.



Today was another busy day, and Sofia poked her head in to check on the butler as he took care of his master's work as well as his own. She was wearing an outdoor coat and a hood, looking like she was headed out somewhere.

"I will be going to see the young mistress, Jonathan."

"Oh, you will? Do tell her that all of the servants are concerned for her."

Jonathan looked up from the pile of documents he was signing and nodded, but Sofia's next words made him freeze.

"We will also be leaving on a two- or three-day business trip, so Meia and I will not be returning for that time."

What are the maids doing, leaving on a business trip when the master is out of the house?

Jonathan thought about it a moment, then resumed his work.

"Understood. Do take care."

No good would come of him worrying about the details where the young mistress was concerned.



Instead of heading to the castle first, Sofia went to a business in a nearby district. She was stopping by the office to get a report from the trading firm's representative. The business was a front, of course. They managed communications with far-off lands, prepared supplies for their young mistress, and fulfilled any special requests of hers. Yes, the Black Cat Company, located not all that far from the mansion, was a base for Sofia and the other members of the Black Cats of the Dark Night.

Sofia entered by the side entrance, and after she'd confirmed nothing was amiss, she called for the wagon at once. The luggage cart had already been prepared for her arrival, so she had only to get in the back with her escorts. When the wagon left through the wooden door in the back garden, the shop looked no different from how it usually did.



Being a palace gate guard was a fairly busy job, but it was only really hectic up until around noon. Once everyone arriving for the day got inside the gate, they had business to attend to, so visitors rarely showed up later in the day. At some point in the afternoon, practically

no visitors or wagons sought admittance to the castle.

Be that as it may, this afternoon, a small, nondescript wagon was approaching the palace gate.

“Halt! Erm, what department are you delivering to?” hailed an elderly guard.

The old man sitting in the driver’s seat lifted up the brim of his hat and smiled. “This is a cat food delivery.”

“Understood! Go on through!”

The guard gave a signal as he handed the driver an entry pass, and the other guards removed the barricade. The driver nodded and began moving the wagon toward the palace. It seemed the guard had passed a message to the other gates, because the guards there allowed the wagon through without stopping it.

The wagon turned and drove to the building housing the dungeon, stopping with its door to the rear. Sofia stepped down, then the driver and the escorts opened the cover and immediately began unloading.

That’s when the knights charged out of the bushes. They stopped in front of Sofia and saluted.

In a perfectly calm voice, Sofia asked, “And the ‘dogs’?”

“At this time of day, they’re all gathered around the ‘cat.’ The others are watching the surrounding area. The prison guard’s patrol is at three o’clock today.”

A number of other low-ranking palace bureaucrats were helping unload as well. Sofia left the task to them and headed down to the dungeon.



When Rachel noticed what was going on up top, she undid the padlock and took off the chains. As for the lock on the door, she currently had her hands through the bars and was skillfully picking it from the other side.

“Young mistress, when you want to open the door, please use your key,” Sofia complained, but Rachel was unconcerned.

“I have to put my techniques to use once in a while or I’ll get rusty.”

“If you leave scratches, they will figure out how we do this. What would you do if they filled the keyhole with metal?”

“Wouldn’t it be neat if the bars themselves could retract into the wall?”

“Save that for next time, would you?”

“I’m going to be put in here again?”

Pushing her mistress aside, Sofia opened the door using a spare key, which no one but the prison guard should have had. Incidentally, Rachel had one too, but she wouldn’t use it. It would offend her pride

as a picker. Okay, no, that was a lie.

“Have you found anything wanting in your lifestyle here?” Sofia asked.

“Nothing that stands out. I’ve been sleeping well since we brought in a proper bed too. It’s helping me make progress with my writing.”

“I have complimentary copies from the Mouse & Rat Company in the wagon, so please, take a look at them for yourself later. How have you managed to write ten volumes even though you have been here for less than a month?”

“Hee hee, when your characters take on a life of their own, they do all the moving for you.”

Rachel stepped through the door into the front room for the first time in about a month.

“Mm! That’s the smell of freedom!”

“With only a set of iron bars in the way, the air here is no different to what you have been breathing all along. We are short on time, so hurry up and sit down, please.”

Sofia sat Rachel down in the prison guard’s chair and began combing the brunette wig she’d brought with her. Rachel had long hair to begin with, so they were using a darker wig and being careful to keep her real hair from showing through. Sofia tidied up Rachel’s hairstyle and made her presentable.

“These are tickets for a box seat. They will be performing *The Prince and the Pauper*. The young master will be at the house today and tomorrow, so I booked a twin bedroom with a living room for you at the Green Leaves Inn. Meia will be on hand to dress you for your return to the prison. If you have any business with the mansion, have Meia deliver your commands to Lisa.”

Rachel, already dressed to go out, checked her hair in the mirror and smiled happily. “I haven’t seen Alexandra in so long! That would have been back before her father took his new post, so it’s been a whole year now.”

“There was a message from her saying that she has been wanting to see you too and is looking forward to hearing all of the details. Lady Martina sent a letter as well, by messenger pigeon, to apologize for not being able to attend.”

As she talked, Sofia took off her hood and coat. Her ash gray hair had already been dyed chocolate brown and done up in the same style as her young mistress’s. She was also dressed in Rachel’s loungewear. Rachel and Sofia were very alike in height and figure, so this worked in their favor, but usually, the difference in their dress and manner overshadowed their similarities.

“You could have changed here, at least. Is the size all right?” Rachel asked Sofia.

“I was unsure of how much time I would have to make myself up once inside the prison. It frustrates me, though, that there is spare room in the chest area.”

“You shouldn’t complain, you know? Or Miss Punching Bag will show up to haunt you.”

“That girl is still alive and well, right?”

Not long after, the driver came to inform them that they’d finished unloading. Rachel donned Sofia’s hood and coat while Sofia went inside the cell and checked to ensure that nothing had been overlooked.

“Oh, right. Young mistress, there was no real garbage for us to collect the last time we came either. What have you been doing with your table scraps and such?”

“Hm? Well, it wouldn’t do to just leave them around, right? I was throwing them out the window into the back gardens, but it seems someone lodged a complaint. Now I simply throw it all into the bin in the front room, and Mr. Guard separates and collects it.”

That complaint had likely come from a certain lover of the back gardens.

“Oh, I see. Very well, then.”

Sofia dropped the subject without prying further. If the problem had been solved, she cared as little as Rachel as to how. They were generally quite similar.

Rachel locked the door from the outside, and Sofia attached the padlock and chains from the inside. This one time, despite the usual ease with which she seemed to do everything, Sofia dropped the chains and had to pick them back up.

“Young mistress, I am impressed you could lift these.”

“If I couldn’t have lifted that much, I wouldn’t have been able to carry on a light conversation while holding a crossbow at the ready either.”

There was probably only one young lady in the world who would call threatening the prince “light conversation.”

Rachel quickly looked around the front room to see if she was forgetting anything. “I’ve been staying up well into the night lately and changing up my daily schedule, so as long as you’re under the covers, Mr. Guard shouldn’t bother you. The issue will be dealing with His Highness and his cronies when they occasionally drop by, but...you can handle them, right?”

Sofia pressed her neck in a number of spots and cleared her throat. Then...

“I already look pretty close with this makeup, so if I keep the lights down, it’s unlikely they’ll notice. I mean, you know how His Highness and Miss Punching Bag are, right?”

Sofia had responded with Rachel's voice and manner of speech.

Rachel grinned with satisfaction and nodded to the driver before climbing the stone steps. "Ta-ta, Sofia. I'll see you about this time, the day after tomorrow."

"Yes, please do enjoy your pajama party."

"I'm not thrilled that it's to talk about His Highness and George, though."



Once she left the dungeon, Rachel had no time to look at the wide-open sky, which she was seeing for the first time in a month, as she stepped into the wagon. As the wheels began rattling, she rested her head on her palm and narrowed her eyes.

"Now, then...I think I'll start by chopping off his arms and legs."

23: The Maid Deals with an Unwanted Guest

"Now then, what shall I do?" Sofia murmured to herself under the covers.

After she'd switched places with Rachel yesterday, Sofia hadn't been shy about taking advantage of her young mistress's bed. Even if it was simple and only meant for temporary repose, it was still of excellent make, designed and built to satisfy a duke's daughter.

The bed had been conscientiously designed for use in the dungeon, with a wide gap between the mattress and the floor to allow humidity to escape. The comforter was made with high-quality down and would naturally disperse any moisture from sweat absorbed during the night. There was also a ceiling and silk gauze curtains to maintain privacy. To be perfectly frank, this bed promised a far more restful sleep than the one Sofia and the other high-ranking maids who'd been allotted personal rooms were accustomed to sleeping in.

Now, as for what all that was pointing to...

For the first time in her twenty-one years serving Rachel, Sofia had slept in.

I could say, "Tee hee," but it would just make me feel stupid, saying it out loud like that.

As long as nothing happened, she was just supposed to laze around pretending to be Rachel, so sleeping in shouldn't be a problem. After all, Rachel had brought a ton of books in here, and they'd just topped off her supply of tea and biscuits. Aside from minding the rare guest, it was essentially going to be a two-day break—or it was *supposed* to be.

Who would have thought that Prince Elliott and his associates would turn up while she was sound asleep.



It wasn't that Sofia woke up when Elliott arrived so much as she was jolted awake.

Although I did have the curtains drawn just to be safe, it was a poor decision to remove my makeup before going to sleep.

While Rachel and Sofia's overall silhouettes were similar, their faces weren't so alike that one could be mistaken for the other in broad daylight. That was why they'd developed a natural makeup routine that would make Sofia look like her young mistress at a glance. However, if they saw her before she even put it on, it wasn't going to do her any good. Sofia couldn't let them see her face directly, so she had to chase them off somehow without getting out of bed.

In an arrogant tone, the vague outline of a man on the other side of the curtains said, "What's this, Rachel? You won't even let us see you? You're in an even worse mood than usual today."

That's your fault, you bumbling prince. I hope you go bald!

Sofia mentally cursed the prince, but there were more important things to do than laying into him verbally. She had to do something about this situation. If Elliott suspected anything was different from usual, then what was the point of leaving a body double in the first place?

"That's quite a thing for you to say after barging into a young maiden's bedchambers. Have you considered going bald, perhaps?"

Rachel's voice came out of Sofia's throat along with a heaping dose of malice and mockery. It was perfect. Sofia had been with the young mistress night and day, so she knew how to talk like Rachel when she was showing her true nature.

The silhouette half-visible through the curtains, which vaguely resembled a prince, twitched. "Wh-What? You're awfully direct today, aren't you?"

Based on his confusion, Sofia had apparently been a little off.

Not good. I'll need to correct myself.

"I'm in a sour mood right now. You woke me up all of a sudden so early in the morning, and it's left me quite on edge."

"Morning... It's well past noon, you know? When did you go to sleep?" Elliott questioned.

Drat.

Now he was doubting her common sense.

"If we calculate from the time I went to sleep, then this is morning."

"You've finally decided you're the center of the world, have you?"

And that had just made it worse.

What now?

The prince—supposedly—on the other side of the curtains shook his head. “Argh! That doesn’t matter right now! Rachel, how dare you trick poor, innocent Margaret when she doesn’t know anything!”

“Margaret?”

Sofia knew she’d heard the name, but in her flustered state, she couldn’t put a face to it. She’d heard it in connection with the prince recently, but who did it belong to?

Elliott had apparently heard her mumbling Margaret’s name, because his prince-like silhouette was now visibly angry.

“Why you... After what you put me and Margaret through, why does it sound like you have no idea who she is?! I’ll have you know, Margaret still hasn’t gotten out of bed after being blasted by that rotten can! Even George and I only got up yesterday! Don’t you feel any pangs of conscience, putting your own little brother and poor, frail Margaret through something so awful?!”

Something awful... A rotten can... Can...? Oh!

“Oh, Miss Punching Bag!”

“Huh?! ”

“I remember now! Goodness, Your Highness, you really must call her by her proper name, or who will be able to tell who you’re talking about?”

“Huh? No. I don’t know anyone called Punching Bag...”

“It’s your own girlfriend’s name, isn’t it? You can’t go forgetting these things. This is the problem with you, Your Highness.”

“Girlfriend...? Wait, you’re talking about Margaret?! Margaret is her real name! Margaret Poisson! Who’re you calling Punching Bag?!”

Oh, that’s right. It was an inconsequential detail, so I got it wrong.

As far as Sofia was concerned, she’d been having a relaxed conversation with this piece of societal trash, but she must have said something that offended him. Now the awful prince had gotten even angrier.

“Argh! It’s one thing after another with you! Rachel, how dare you not show your face when someone is genuinely angry with you! Get out here and get on your knees!”

“Tch!”

To think the pea-brained prince would come up with a cogent argument. Still, there was no way Sofia could go out there. She needed to shut him down while also ending this conversation in a way that maintained the upper hand for her young mistress.

“Did you just click your tongue at me?! What kind of attitude is that to take with the prince of a country?!”

Sofia responded with silence. She’d be able to lead into her next move better this way.

“Are you listening to me, Rachel?! I’m mad! Get out here right

now!”

As Sofia had expected, the enraged prince barked his order again, although she had to question his propriety for shaking the jail bars in a fit of anger. She’d heard about it from her young mistress, but he really did act like a monkey.

Sofia sat up in bed, holding the sheets close to her. From where they were standing, all they could tell was that she was covering herself with the bedding.

“Your Highness...”

“What?!” Elliott snapped.

“You truly don’t understand a woman’s feelings,” Sofia said with a deliberate sigh.

“Huh...?”

Elliott fell into an angry yet curious silence. Taking her young mistress’s example, Sofia laid on the sweet poison.

“I cannot possibly get out of bed with you there, Your Highness. I don’t wear anything when I go to sleep...”

Elliott—no, all of the men were shaken up. Based on all the hubbub out there, she could conclude that the prince had brought a bunch of his insignificant hangers-on with him.

“Y-Your Highness...?!” cried one of them.

“D-Don’t lose your head! Th-This could be Rachel’s scheme,” cautioned another.

You’re right that it’s a scheme, but, sadly, it isn’t one of the young mistress’s.

Things fell strangely silent. Elliott coughed politely, then said in a dignified tone, “Ha! Ha! Ha! You can’t fool me, Rachel. That can’t possibly be the case. Right?”

He was trying to pretend everything was normal, but Sofia could tell that he was shaken. She decided to follow up with more.

“Oh, were you not aware, Your Highness? This is a common custom among high-class ladies in our country, you know?”

At this point, Elliott and his merry band of idiots couldn’t hide their panic.

“Y-Y-Y-Your Highness?! Th-Th-That means that all the girls do it too?!” shrieked one of the hangers-on.

“W-Wait! D-D-D-D-Don’t lose your head, man!” Elliott replied.

“B-But, think about it! Now that we’ve learned this super secret information...I’ll never be able to look up in court again!”

“Calm down! We’ve done nothing wrong! Keep a level head! Stay calm. *Calm*. Are you with me? Now, the next time you look at a young lady, you are *not* to imagine her that way! Got it?!”

Their all too innocent reactions made Sofia think, *These boys have been fooling around less than I thought.*

Now that Elliott and his cronies had lost control, Sofia delivered the final blow.

“Oh, your Highness, do you doubt me?”

“Huh? No, not particularly?!”

“If you cannot trust me, then perhaps you should ask Lady Margaret whether it’s true?”

Even before Sofia finished, the wind of silence had already whirled violently through the room. The sexual imagery of her words blew them away, and they started hitting one another for imagining it. Elliott’s bozo brigade fell apart at those mere words, their imaginations leaving them in agony and rendering them unable to fight.

Once she was sure that they were all staring into space, laid low by their own thoughts, Sofia said, “Um, Your Highness? Before we speak, I’d like to put my clothes on...”

“Huh? Oh, yes, fine! We’ll be outside, so call us when you’re ready!”

Despite claiming to have done nothing wrong, the prince was feeling guilty just for imagining it. His head bobbed up and down like a bobblehead doll, and he drove his hangers-on out of the room, following behind them.

“No peeping from the window either, okay?” Sofia added.

“I know! I know, all right?!” Elliott yelped.

Once the sound of footsteps on the stairs vanished, Sofia breathed a sigh of relief.

“Whew, that was tense. Thank goodness he didn’t seem to notice.”

Sofia was, of course, wearing pajamas. She was a servant, after all.

And though I have helped my lady get dressed countless times, I cannot recollect a single one where she was naked.

That was because there was no such custom in this country.

Since Elliott and the boys had so kindly left so that Sofia could get changed, she went back to sleep. Obviously, she had no intention of calling them back in.



When Rachel returned the next day, her face was aglow.

“I’m so glad you booked an inn. We had so much to talk about that we chatted late into the night. If we were at the house, Martha would have chucked us both into bed.”

“I am happy to hear it,” Sofia said.

“We brought meat skewers that we bought at a food stall with us, and ordered ale from room service for a toast. I’ve never had a meal like that before. It was so much fun.”

“Is it really wise for noblewomen like yourselves to be doing

that?”

There were no supplies to bring in today, so Rachel and Sofia were exchanging information over tea. They were going to wrap it up quickly, though, since they had to be wary of others.

“Still, Sofia, couldn’t you have ended it a little more peacefully?”

“Could I? I have never fought with the prince, and I thought I made him leave rather quietly.”

“Well, yes, but...now His Highness and the others think I sleep in the nude. If they were to tell anyone, it would be something of a scandal.”

“Oh, that,” Sofia replied, holding the teapot with an uncharacteristically pleasant smile. “Since the rumors would not be about *me*, I thought it was fine, really.”

“I don’t hate the way you’re cold to absolutely everyone, you know that?”



“Ah... Taking a stroll around town for the first time in a while was nice and all, but...”

Drinking the last sip of her now slightly lukewarm tea, Rachel leaned back in her reclining chair and stretched.

“You know, I’m just more comfortable here in my own, personal prison!”

“Seriously, young mistress.”

24: The Maid is Busy

Even when Rachel, the eldest daughter of the House of Ferguson, was away, her personal maid Sofia stayed busy. True, Sofia didn’t have her mistress to look after, but there were still countless other things for her to do—except cleaning the rooms, of course. Unless a great deal of secrecy was required, that was a task for lesser maids. Furthermore, the laundry was left to maids who specialized in the area. In other words, even though Sofia had little to do in her mistress’s absence, she still had plenty of other tasks to attend to.

The other maids in the household were mystified to see the young mistress’s personal maids running all over even though their mistress was absent.

“Well, it must be confusing for people with other assignments,” Lisa said. “Helena in laundry asked me, ‘How do you all have so much work?’”

Sofia nodded. “Yes. Normally, a maid in a noble household wouldn’t be balancing the books for a trading firm.”

Sofia and Lisa were reviewing the Black Cat Company’s

expenditures from the past month. They didn't really suspect any embezzlement, though. It was just a routine task, checking the books every month for mistakes.

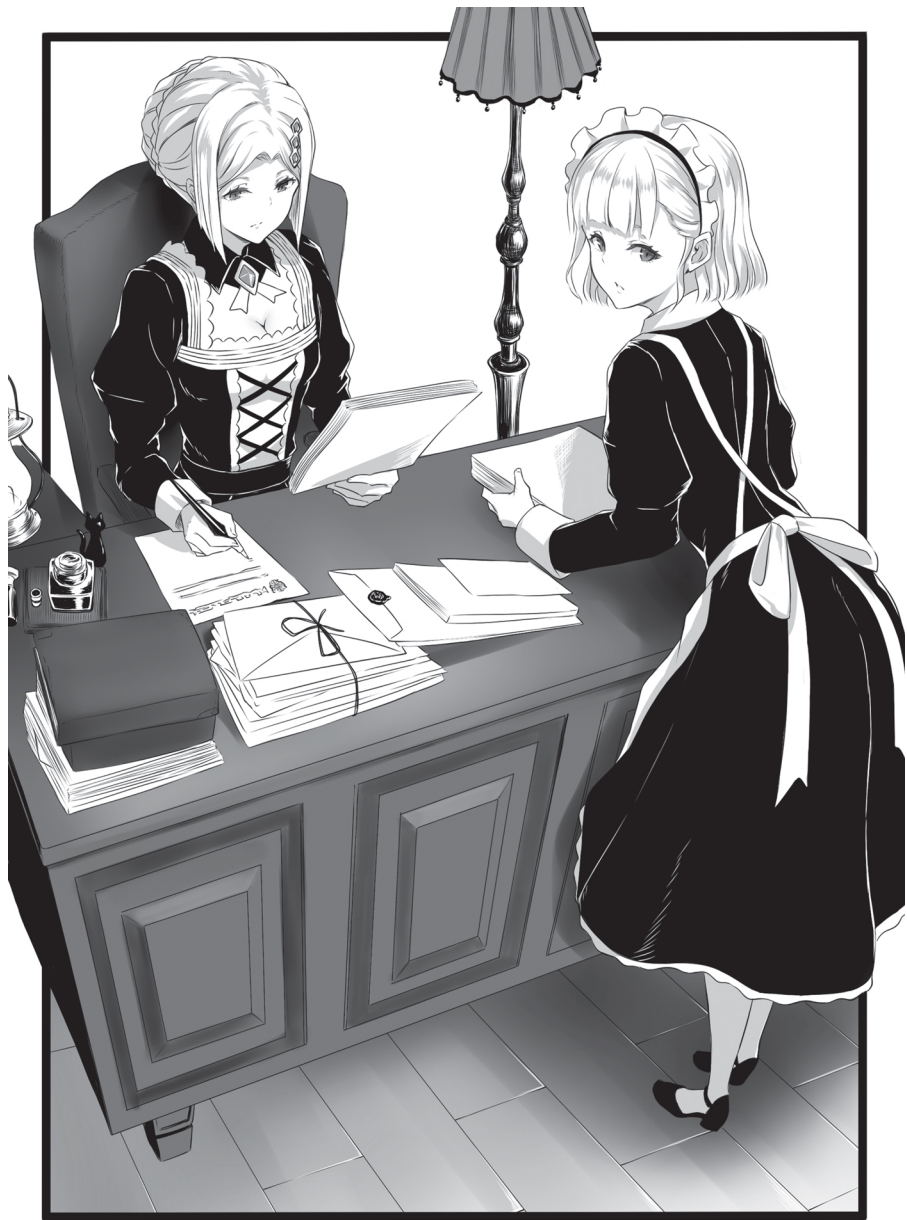
Being at Rachel's side meant learning her secrets. As members of the Black Cats of the Dark Night, Sofia and the other maids had an almost murderously heavy workload, even when Rachel wasn't around.



While Sofia and Lisa were staring down the mountain of documents, Mimosa and Meia entered the room.

"We have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?" Mimosa asked.

Sofia and Lisa looked at each other.



“They’re two sides of the same coin, right? Give us both together,” Lisa said, sounding exhausted.

“Oh, Lisa, you’re no fun. The good news is that four cases of clay masks have arrived from the Kingdom of Zenoya.”

Everyone—except for Sofia, who actually was no fun—threw their hands in the air to celebrate. Clay from Zenoya was renowned for its incredible beautifying properties, but importing even one jar of it cost a number of gold coins. Normally, only nobles or affluent merchants could afford it, but Rachel offered it to her subordinates at cost as a reward for their hard work. Her subordinates just had to load the jars into the regularly scheduled carts when there was room for them, so Rachel was able to buy it at almost the same price that Zenoya’s locals paid.

Rachel provided these sorts of expensive cosmetics to the women, and rare foreign alcohol to the men, for dirt cheap as a way to win their hearts and minds. People wouldn’t work for all whip and no carrot. Incidentally, Rachel had her hooks in the customs employees as well, so she could bring these gifts into the country undeclared—generally referred to as “smuggling.”

Because the maids were young women, most wanted the products for themselves, but they also had the option to buy the rights to them and leave them with the Black Cat Company to sell on their behalf. It was bonus pay, but in the form of foreign souvenirs. No one could be unsatisfied with that.

Just as everyone was feeling happy, Mimosa let the other shoe drop. “Now, as for the bad news... Since the ship has arrived, you also have a big pile of extra foreign reports to sort through. Good luck with that.”

This time, everyone—Sofia included—hung their heads.



The Black Cat Company was a medium-sized business that faced one of the capital’s back streets. At first glance, it didn’t look like it would be prosperous, but many of its customers were among the nobility and the upper class due to the large selection of quality-made foreign goods. Since the majority of their business was conducted through house calls, they’d refrained from setting up a storefront on the main street, but those in the know were acquainted with the business and its reputation for only dealing with the best.

That was how the customers saw the Black Cat Company, but if you were to ask Sofia or one of the other insiders, they’d tell you that while the public perception wasn’t a lie, it wasn’t the whole truth either. For this company, which had been founded without disclosing

that Rachel was its sponsor, the luxury goods trade was no more than a front. It made money for its operations that way, but the branch stores abroad sent back not just products but intel as well. The employees were also able to enter the houses of powerful individuals in the capital, surreptitiously uncovering valuable information.

Their top priority, obviously, was infiltrating factions that were hostile to the House of Ferguson or Rachel herself. That was why, if Rachel said the word, they could discover anything from what Prince Elliott had for dinner to the layout of the cosmetics on Margaret's dresser. That would be silly, though, so Rachel had never given an order like that.

Sofia was tasked with managing not only the Black Cat Company, but also Rachel's personal forces inside the ducal house and the servants in the palace whom Rachel had won over. No duh, she was busy. Organizing all the incoming information, public and otherwise, and signing off on the paperwork in Rachel's stead... Even if Sofia were to have subordinates helping her, it wouldn't be enough.

Sofia took a sip of the tea Meia had made, then sighed. "It might not be unreasonable if I were to pay myself triple the salary..."

"After all, the work we do isn't in a maid's job description..." Lisa added.

The other maids working with them all nodded, looking tired.

There were ten commanders of the Black Cats of the Dark Night. The main five were Sofia, the top commander; Meia, in charge of domestic politics; Lisa, in charge of domestic finance; Mimosa, in charge of international affairs; and Heidi, in charge of operations inside the palace. They worked together with Campbell, the "acting" president of the Black Cat Company; Waters, their face in the underworld; and three anonymous individuals, in charge of the knights, bureaucrats, and courtiers inside the palace.

These ten took charge of their respective domains, cooperating with one another to keep the organization running. If you counted everyone, including those on the fringes who had no idea of the command structure, then the Black Cats of the Dark Night's membership numbered in the hundreds.

"Is it all right for half the people at the top to be young maids?" Lisa questioned.

"All we did was follow the young mistress's orders, and at some point, we found ourselves capable of sorting through secret intel without questioning it," Sofia answered.

"The people at the bottom don't know about us to begin with. Some of Waters's men have probably mistaken us for a crime syndicate."

“Waters looked down on us at first too, but once I brought him to the young mistress’s room, she had him as tame as a kitten in five minutes.”

“I guess the young mistress’s crazy criminal vibe had an effect on him...” Lisa mused.

“If the young mistress calls you on talking about her like that,” Sofia said, “I am not going to cover for you.”



Once they’d gone through everything, Sofia got permission from Jonathan to head out with Lisa. The roads were still wet from the rain, so they wouldn’t kick up dust as they went, and the sun had come out—ideal conditions for a walk.

“This place is perfect. If we were normal maids, we’d probably be delighted to get out and about like this,” Lisa said.

“Yes,” Sofia replied, “but since we are always heading out on the young mistress’s business, it does not feel special at all, no matter where we go.”

“Agreed. The way we traipse through the back streets at night, we’re just not like normal young women.”

Sofia and Lisa headed to the Black Cat Company with their finished report. When they arrived, they were immediately shown through to the president’s office, where a well-set old man was busily filing paperwork and a middle-aged man with a villainous face was lounging on a sofa—part of a reception set—smoking.

Once Sofia and Lisa entered the room, Sofia walked past the sofa, casually hooking her foot under it as she did, and upended it, middle-aged man and all.

“I have told you before that you are *not* to smoke when I am coming, Waters,” Sofia reprimanded him.

“That was a little violent and out of nowhere, wasn’t it, big sis?!”

The man called Sofia “big sis” even though he was over forty and she was still in her twenties. Neither Lisa nor Campbell acted like this was at all unusual; Lisa took her seat, and Campbell got up from his desk and came over to join them. In addition to delivering the documents, Sofia and Lisa were here for an executive meeting of the Black Cats of the Dark Night.

“What’s wrong, Waters? Would you get up already?” Campbell chided.

“Show a little concern, would ya, old man?” Waters replied.

Sofia quickly looked through the two men’s reports, then put them in an envelope together with her own and handed the envelope to Lisa.

“Now, Lisa will be the one slipping inside today, Mr. Campbell. See to it,” Sofia instructed.

“Understood. The wagon is ready and waiting.”

They smuggled reports and supplies into the palace for Rachel by mixing them in with the daily deliveries from a subsidiary of the Black Cat Company that dealt in foodstuffs. This was just a ruse, though. The Black Cat Company actually sent the wagons directly, which was why sometimes all its contents went to Rachel instead of some going to the kitchens. They had a good number of agents inside the palace, especially at the gate, among the knights, and around Prince Elliott, so their wagons always went through with only a cursory inspection by their own people, bringing in a variety of different things every time. On days like today, Rachel’s subordinates—the maids—might be hitching a ride in the back.

“If Miss Lisa’s going herself, then has something big happened?” Campbell asked.

Sofia presented Campbell with another document and said, “They will be having a meeting about this. See?”

Campbell and Waters leaned in close together as they looked at the paper. When their zigzagging eyes reached the bottom, they each sighed.

“Well now...” Campbell muttered.

“She’s as nuts as ever,” Walters remarked. “She’s really going to do this in the dungeon?”

Sofia must have expected these reactions, because she simply pulled out a list and began calmly explaining.

“That being the case, Mr. Campbell, I need you to prepare these materials.”

“I can do that, but... What about the people involved? Can we do the setup for this by ourselves?”

“I will use the young mistress’s name and ask them to come in the name of the ducal house. They are more likely to agree that way.”

That Sofia could use Rachel’s name without asking was proof of how much Rachel trusted Sofia.

“And as for me, you want me to contact all these people?” Waters asked. He was looking down at his own list with a scowl. The people on it were all first-rate and wouldn’t come along for chump change.

“There should still be plenty of time, so find a way to persuade them,” Sofia insisted.

“You make it sound so easy, sis. These are all big shots in the industry, the kind of guys who can talk down to me, you know?”

“I have been thinking about that too. Arrange appointments, and if there is anyone you do not think you can persuade, contact me.”

When Waters expressed his hesitation, Sofia implied that she had

some way of convincing them. However, he looked at her dubiously, figuring that this was just the idea of some servant in a noble house, detached from reality.

“What, sis, are you gonna have the old man pile up gold in front of them?” Waters asked.

Sofia shook her head. “No. If we’re successful, I’ll have the young mistress bow her head to them.”

“What?!” Waters exclaimed.

Campbell and Waters, who were both experienced in their own fields, froze. But of course they would. The daughter of the ducal house, next in rank only to the king and the royal family, would be lowering her head to people of common birth who, despite their fame, were little more than drifters. Given the difference in their status and a noble’s sense of pride, this kind of thing would never happen. But Rachel would do it. If she went that far, it was sure to make a positive impression on the person she was asking, but still...

“You’re serious?!” Waters said, sounding incredulous.

“Dead serious,” Sofia answered. “The young mistress is not the type to let her pride get in the way at times like these.”

“Maybe not, but... You actually got her permission for that?”

With an almost refreshing degree of ease, Sofia replied, “That is what Lisa is going to do after this, is it not?”

“Huh? I’m what?” Lisa squeaked.

Waters and Campbell’s jaws hit the floor. It seemed that so little planning had gone into this that not even the messenger knew their part.

Once Waters finally managed to recover somewhat, he said, “Hold up... What’re you gonna do if we make that promise and then the boss lady says she doesn’t want to do it?”

“Well, if the promise is already made, the young mistress will have to do it,” Sofia replied, sounding blasé. “If she objects, I’ll get her down on her hands and knees to ask permission, even if I have to step on her head to do it.”

Everyone but Sofia froze with shock again.

Lisa murmured, “I could never imitate that kind of relationship with the young mistress...”

“Sofia’s more like a foster sister than a childhood friend...” Campbell remarked.

“Normally you’d expect her to hold back *a little*, though...” Waters added.

Sofia’s words had reminded them of something important: Rachel wasn’t the only member of the Black Cats of the Dark Night who was crazy.



After Sofia saw the wagon off, she left the Black Cat Company. She stretched her arms wide, then started walking.

“Goodness, I certainly have worked hard today.”

She didn’t have any work left to do at this point. Come tomorrow, however, she’d awake to another hectic morning.

Coming to a crossroads, Sofia turned toward the mansion. She lifted her foot to take a step but then softly lowered it. Knowing how cheeky many of the other maids could be, it was possible that they’d left some portion of the documents untouched, saying they were Sofia’s share.

“I will not like it if I go back to the mansion and there is a pile of work waiting for me...”

Sofia did an about-face and went the other way. That was the way to a shop that served the fluffy chiffon cake that she’d been enamored with lately, along with fragrant tea.

“I have worked hard enough for today. I think I can allow myself a tea break, at the very least, as a perk of the job.”

Sofia was just as cheeky as her colleagues. She planned to invoice the cost as a business expense.



“Oh no, I screwed up!” a maid suddenly shouted as she was wiping a vase. The maid beside her, who was standing on tiptoe dusting a picture frame, nearly fell over.

“What’s wrong, Theodora?” the other maid asked.

“I forgot to give Miss Lisa my letter before she left!” Theodora cried.

“A letter? For the young mistress?” Rachel was relatively friendly toward the house servants, but it was still unusual for a common maid to write her a letter while she was in prison. “What’s the big deal? Were you requesting a vacation?”

“No, much more important!” The bespectacled Theodora clenched her fists as she launched into an impassioned explanation. “I want her to write a scene in her next work where Sykes turns the tables on Prince Elliott, and I wrote a fan letter with an outline for it! I was hoping it would let her know how strongly I feel about this...”

The other maid, who was holding a feather duster, shrugged as Theodora quietly cursed herself and writhed in agony.

“Why are you getting so into a series of novels that the young mistress only writes in her spare time? And with *that* kind of content... Your tastes are rotten, girl.”

“What are you saying? All women are all rotten like me!”

“Don’t lump us in with you!”

Their squabbling continued until the head maid walked by.

25: The Young Lady Entertains Guests

Being a prince, Elliott had a number of jobs he had to do daily. Moreover, there had recently been a massive increase in the amount of paperwork he had to sign and the number of inspections he had to perform, so his days were so busy that he forgot all about that aggravating dungeon.

Unfortunately, Elliott was forced to remember its infuriating inhabitant when he looked outside during tea time and spotted smoke rising from near a building he was all too familiar with.

“Fine weather we’re having today,” Elliott remarked.

“Can you see that, Your Highness?” Sykes asked. “There’s smoke.”

“Maybe I’ll take Margaret out for a long ride up the hill.”

“That’s near the dungeon, right? Is she burning firewood or something?”

“Now that I think about it, I’ve been overworking recently and not getting enough exercise. That’s not good.”

“Huh? I smell meat cooking. Whoa, this is really getting my appetite going.”

“All right, let’s head out of town for the day! We’ll set out as soon as Margaret arrives, so go get the horses ready!”

“Your Highness, are you listening? Rachel’s up to something again.”

“Sykes, His Highness is trying not to notice...” George cut in.



Elliott dragged himself down to the dungeon—partly out of a sense of obligation—and when he arrived, he saw two men by the door, packing up a barbecue. Based on their dress, they were chefs in training. Elliott ignored them and proceeded inside.

“Huh? You’re not going to interrogate them, Your Highness?” Sykes asked, tugging on Elliott’s sleeve.

Elliott turned around with a sour look on his face. “Look at them. They’re just flunkies. Whatever’s going on here, the main attraction is downstairs. And so is the cause of it. Of that we can be certain.”

“After all, my sister can’t leave her cell,” George noted.

Elliott and George nodded at each other, but Sykes kept on going, unwilling to accept their answer so easily.

“But, Your Highness...” he started.

“What, did you have something more to say?” Elliott replied.

“If you don’t leave Miss Rachel alone and stop them right now,

they're going to pack up and leave without cooking any for us."

"That's your priority?! Food?!"

Down in the dungeon, a well-set chef was standing in front of the bars and explaining the various dishes.

"This is today's main dish, prison-style rare beef fillet. Normally, I cook the meat on an iron plate so that it looks nice, but this time, I chose to cook on a grill to create the image of iron bars. As for the sauce, I couldn't use the juices to make it, so I cooked it directly in the charcoal flame in order to give it a fragrant, smoky flavor that I think has a certain rustic charm to it."

After Rachel put a small slice of the steak in her mouth, she cheerfully declared, "It's delicious! This sauce is so different from what I've had in the restaurant."

"I took my inspiration from your own beauty, Lady Ferguson, and used bitter chocolate as the base for the sauce."

"Oh, you are such a flatterer!"

As the customer and the chef happily exchanged opinions on the food, Elliott called out, "Isn't it about time you listened to what we have to say?"

The blank looks on Rachel and the chef's faces seemed to say, "Huh? What does he want?"

Elliott glanced at his associates. George nodded slightly and stepped forward. He glowered at Rachel, pointing at the plate in front of her.

"Sister, about all of this food... How did you get the plates into your cell?"

"That's not what I wanted to know!" Elliott yelled.

The chef bowed. "My apprentices put the plates in ahead of time, and then I placed the meat on them with tongs and put on the finishing touches inside."

"So that's how it worked!" George said excitedly.

"I told you, that part doesn't matter!" Elliott shouted, pushing George aside. "Rachel, I told you before, didn't I?! No ordering food in."

Rachel swallowed the bite in her mouth, nodding earnestly. "Yes, you did say that."

"I see. Then what is this, exactly?"

Rachel looked down at her plate. "Goodness, Your Highness. This isn't order-in food."

"Oh? Then what is it?"

"This is catering," Rachel answered, flashing Elliott an innocent smile.

"That's the same thing, you idiot!" Elliott looked around with bloodshot eyes. "I'm sure I ask this every time, but what is the prison

guard doing?!”

The moment Elliott said that, his eyes met with those of the guard, who was sitting in his chair. He held a plate with the same food Rachel had and was munching on a mouthful of meat. When his eyes met the prince's, he hurriedly swallowed, then grinned and shot the prince a thumbs-up.

“It's all good! Nothing suspicious has come though! I've been carefully testing it all for poison!”

“You're not testing it for poison, you're just tasting it! And I don't care what's in this wretch's food! You let her buy you off for a measly scrap of meat!”

“No, Your Highness. I'm not nearly so cheap. I insisted on a full course meal from the beginning.”

While Elliott considered summarily executing the guard, Rachel finished her steak and laid down her fork.

“Your Highness. All I've done is order in...catering, you know?”

“Just now, you were about to say you ordered in food, weren't you?” Elliott prodded.

Ignoring Elliott's reasonable objection, Rachel replied, “There is going to be a party at the House of Ferguson soon, so I was taste-testing the food we'll be serving.”

“There's no need for you to taste-test the food in prison when they have me, sister,” George pointed out.

Tragically, George was ignored too, because Elliott burst out laughing and interjected, “You, taste-testing party food?! When you can't attend yourself?! What, are they going to put up banners saying you sponsored it?! Or maybe read a little message from you saying you're wishing for their success from afar?!”

Rachel might have pulled a lot of nonsense, but she clearly wasn't going to be attending a gathering at her house. It was comical how diligently she was helping plan a party she couldn't go to herself. Did Rachel not realize how ridiculous she looked? It was the first time Elliott had been so satisfied by anything that involved Rachel, and he just couldn't stop laughing.

Rachel watched Elliott cackle triumphantly. She thought of the letter hidden beneath her plate and smiled.

I'm glad it's to your liking, Your Highness. You'll be attending too, of course?



When they saw how adorable Margaret looked all dolled up, Elliott and her other orbiters all smiled broadly.

“You're beautiful, Margaret. Like a flowery fairy,” Elliott said rather dreamily.

“Oh, Your Highness!”

The way Margaret glared at him in embarrassment was just the cutest. Instead of the perfected beauty of an adult face, hers was full of that girlish charm that existed in the fleeting moments on the path to maturity. Elliott had thought that the evening dress with the low-cut neckline might be too gaudy for her still-youthful beauty, but... Actually, the incongruity worked in her favor!

Seeing how good she looks in it, I'm glad I gave it to her, Elliott thought, grinning.

Wolanski walked up next to him, a goofy grin on his face—essentially the same expression as the prince.

“She’s marvelously beautiful, Your Highness,” he commented.

“Yes, Margaret is truly adorable,” Elliott agreed.

“Yes, truly. The strapless tube dress was an especially good choice.”

“I know, right? It took me some time to decide when I went clothes shopping with her, but I thought that keeping the frills and ribbons to a minimum and going with a simple, mature design might be good.”

Elliott was proud that someone was complimenting his choice, and Wolanski kept coming up with more points to praise.

“Yes. By squeezing them so that it doesn’t slip down, the dress accentuates her modest breasts in a truly wonderful way!”

“That’s a rather...unique perspective,” Elliott muttered.

“Is it? I think it’s quite normal, myself. As chairman of the Flat Chest Society in our kingdom, I would like to award Miss Margaret with the title of Flat Girl of the Year!”

Everything this man was saying was strange.

“I don’t think her breasts are *that* nonexistent...” Elliott contested.

“What is a man of your stature saying, Your Highness?! The flatness must be subtle yet still assertive! We don’t go for just any sheer cliff or washboard, no! If you can’t understand the subtlety of this line, Your Highness, then you’ll never be more than a second-rate flat-chester!”

“If I am ever first-rate at that, I think it’ll be the end of me,” Elliott said as Wolanski breathed heavily through his nostrils. “You act like this, and yet your family name is Booblansky.”

“Wolanski, Your Highness.”

After Margaret finished savoring her new dress, she struck one last pose before running to Elliott’s side.

“Prince Elliott, thank you so much for this!”

“It was nothing, Margaret. I’m happy too, to be able to see you dressed up so beautifully.”

With his beloved clinging to his arm, Elliott had his head in the clouds...for all of a few seconds until the next words out of Margaret's mouth ruined it.

"Okay! I'm going to go brag about this to Miss Rachel! I'll tell her how nice you're being to me!"

Elliott was less than keen on the idea. "Margaret," he said, "you don't have to go out of your way to show her..."

"But, Prince Elliott, Miss Rachel's holding an event of her own, so I wanted to crash the party in my dress and let her know who it is you really love!"



"I wandered by on my way to the castle, and there were all these guests in fancy outfits heading down to the dungeon."

As soon as Margaret finished telling them that, Elliott and the others rushed to the scene.

"Damn! I should have noticed this afternoon," Elliott chided himself on the way.

"Yeah, you really should've," Sykes agreed. "I mean, when does any of the weird stuff Miss Rachel pulls not have a negative impact on you?"

"How is that any basis for deciding what is notable?!"

When they arrived at the prison, they found the door wide open. Dazzling lights poured out of the doorway along with pleasant chatter that could be heard all the way in the rear gardens.

"Damn it! What kind of idiot hosts a party in a dungeon?!" Elliott bellowed.

"Well, it is Miss Rachel," Sykes offered.

George added, "It is my sister..."

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, they found a wide chandelier lit up, making the room as bright as day. It was all a touch rough to call it a soiree, but the ladies and gentlemen were reasonably well dressed. A number of tables that weren't supposed to be there were lined up, and boys were serving dish after dish. And in the corner was the prison guard, wearing a bow tie with his usual squalid work clothes and serving wine from a barrel.

The prison guard...

"Hey, you!" Elliott shouted.

"Oh, if it isn't His Highness."

"Don't you, 'Oh, if it isn't His Highness,' me! What are you doing down here?!"

"Serving alcohol. I took a drink for myself, and the white and the red are both great. We have rosé too, but it's bottled and we only have one case. If you don't get some early, it'll all be gone."

“That’s not the problem here, okay?! You’re supposed to be managing the prison! Why didn’t you stop these people before they came in?!”

The prison guard looked around. “Uh, isn’t it obvious? With all these big shots showing up in groups, one after another, who was I to tell them they couldn’t come in?”

“It’s your job to tell them exactly that! Just run them off!” Elliott demanded.

“But they pushed past me, saying they had invitations. And a lot of them had heavy accents too.”

“Huh?!”

Working his way through the excited crowd, Elliott finally reached Rachel, who was carrying on a pleasant conversation.

“Hey, Rachel! What is all this ruckus about?!” Elliott asked.

“Hello, Your Highness,” Rachel greeted him.

Rachel was all dressed up too. She wore a deep blue evening dress—different from the one she’d been wearing when they jailed her—and some understated pearl jewelry. There was no way she’d had something like this prepared inside her cell. She must have brought it in at some point.

Elliott shot Rachel a glare that could kill, but she spoke to him in a slow, relaxed tone, like one you’d normally use with an acquaintance.

“When I got to thinking about it, I hadn’t thrown a moving party yet,” Rachel commented.

“A moving party?!” Elliott screeched.

“But you know how my position is right now?”

“So you hadn’t forgotten that...”

“I thought it might be difficult for nobles and politicians to come to the party, out of deference to Your Highness, so...I restrained myself and instead limited the invites to foreign ambassadors, men of the cloth, and the merchants I do business with.”

“What kind of half-hearted attempt at being considerate is that?!”

When Elliott turned and surveyed the crowd, he realized that while he certainly did recognize the people there, they weren’t his countrymen. There were even priests in their formal garb. Some people were dressed for a normal soiree and speaking the language of the kingdom, but he didn’t recognize any of them, so they must have been merchants. If they were purveyors to the ducal house, they all must have been fairly wealthy.

By the look on George’s face, he evidently recognized them.

Elliott desperately resisted the urge to call George over as Rachel went on exchanging pleasantries with her guests. She was the life of the party. No one seemed to mind that she was the only one behind a

set of iron bars. Elliott and the others felt so left out that they might as well have been on the other side of the horizon.

“Damn Rachel!” Elliott scoffed.

The guests were all either foreigners, business people, or religious officers. In other words, the prince couldn’t silence them using his authority. He couldn’t even blame the guard for letting them force their way in.

When the guests saw the state of things, it was clear who they would side with. Rachel was skillfully using the party to make her position known, and if Elliott wasn’t careful how he responded, it would make things worse.

As Elliott ground his teeth so hard it was almost audible, Rachel chatted with some white-haired old fart in a language Elliott didn’t understand.

Rachel and the old man clinked their glasses together happily.

“Prison, yay!”

“Yay!”

When Elliott heard their energetic cheers, he couldn’t stop himself. He lunged at them and said, “Hey! What’s so fun about prison?! Huh?!”

“Wait! You can’t do that, Your Highness!” George yelled, desperately trying to drag the prince back. “That man is an archbishop! You can’t fight with him!”

Elliott finally relented. “Damn it. Is there no way to convince these people Rachel is in the wrong?” he said, crying bitterly.

“We’ll have to send people to explain our position to each of them later. Still, with so many of them here, will we be able to remember them all?”

While Elliott and George hid behind a wine barrel in the corner to discuss strategy, Margaret jumped to her feet, her nostrils flaring.

“Prince Elliott, I’m going to go explain to them!” she announced.

“Margaret?!”

“I mean, this is all crazy! You’re righteous! We can’t let the evil Miss Rachel outdo you like this!”

“Outdo me...” Elliott murmured. It was the truth, but hearing Margaret say it hurt.

George hurriedly tried to help Elliott recover, while Margaret walked purposefully to a box at the edge of the crowd and climbed on top of it.

“Everyone, listen to me!” Margaret shouted, sounding out of place. This drew the attendees’ attention, and all eyes gathered on her. “I don’t know what you people were told, but Rachel’s the bad one! Prince Elliott risked putting his fiancée in jail in order to save me! Don’t let her deceive you!”

The room went quiet. Margaret thrust out her meager chest with pride, a smug look on her face. The sound returned...but not in a way that Elliott welcomed.

“Ha ha ha ha ha!”

“It’s a nice joke!”

“Prison, yay!”

The drunk guests assumed this was some sort of entertainment and applauded her. The way Margaret went around bowing her head to each of them after that only made her less convincing. By the end, she’d gotten caught up in the excitement and was sharing a toast with the rest of them too.

“Prison, yay!” Margaret cheered.

“Yay!”

Margaret came back with a mountain of food on her plate and a sparkle in her eyes. “I did it, Prince Elliott!” she trilled.

“Yeah, you sure did...”

Elliott crumpled. He didn’t have the heart to tell her that she’d had no effect whatsoever.

Margaret looked at him with confusion as she stuffed her cheeks with food.



Suddenly, George noticed something.

“Huh? Where’s Sykes? He came here with us,” he wondered aloud.

The prison guard pointed to the center of the room as he poured George a fresh glass of wine. “If you’re looking for the knight guy, he’s been livening up the party since the moment he got here.”

Having missed out on the delicious food and wine earlier that afternoon, Sykes was excitedly chatting with some old man he didn’t know.

“This is nice. I wish we could do this every day,” Sykes said.

“Ha ha ha! Me too!” the old man agreed.

“Me three!” the ambassador of a neighboring country chimed in. Sykes clinked his glass against the ambassador’s.

“Prison, yay!”

26: The Young Lady Takes Care of Her Little Brother

One relaxed afternoon, when the sun shone in at its brightest, two young ladies sat at identical tables on either side of a set of bars, looking like mirror images of each other and enjoying a spot of tea.

“The moving party was a hit, Alexandra,” Rachel said gleefully. “Thank you for assisting with the arrangements. You were a great

help.”

Sitting across from Rachel was a girl with wavy blonde hair and distinctive emerald green eyes. Rachel’s words prompted the corners of her mouth to turn up, forming an intimidating smile.

Alexandra Mountbatten was the daughter of a marquess. Rachel felt she could be herself with Alexandra, so she was a friend and special companion whom Rachel treated almost like family. Compared to Rachel, whose appearance was more demure and understated, Alexandra’s appearance was more flashy, and her beautiful countenance brimmed with confidence. If she were to wear pants instead of a dress and carry a sword, she’d look like the type you’d want to call “Sis.” Hers was a different sort of beauty than Rachel’s.

“You can leave things outside the country to me, Rachel,” Alexandra said. “It’s about all I can do for you, after all.”

Because Alexandra’s father was a high-ranking member of the foreign service, many in the upper echelons of other countries knew her. The reason so many ambassadors had attended Rachel’s moving party—and the reason bad rumors about the prince hadn’t spread after—was thanks to the groundwork Alexandra had laid for it.

“Still, it seems you’ve been enjoying slapping His Highness around. I wish you’d let me in on the fun sooner.”

The provocative smirk on Alexandra’s face suited her well. With the dungeon’s stone walls behind her, she looked almost like the female protagonist of one of those adventure stories.

Rachel, meanwhile, arched her eyebrows and gave Alexandra a small, troubled smile. “It’s nice, but if I beat him too badly, I worry that the stress will make him explode in strange ways.”

“I get you. So...what’s next? Are you letting him off the hook?” Alexandra pointlessly asked, knowing full well that that wouldn’t be happening.

Rachel gave Alexandra a weak smile and shrugged. “Yes, it’s about time to pack it in, so I’m going to hurry up and crush him before he blows up.”

Rachel’s smile only *looked* weak.

“I’d have liked to see you draw this out some more, and have some fun with it,” Alexandra said, “but what can you do?”

“Such a shame,” Rachel replied. “But His Highness never learns, so before he goes crazy and does something reckless, I’ll have to hit him hard enough that he can’t recover.”

“I’ll do my best to support you,” Alexandra stated.

“Hee hee, thanks.”

The two young ladies exchanged charming smiles and clinked their tea cups together.



When George Ferguson disembarked from the carriage, he violently shoved his bag into the waiting butler's hands and entered through the front door. He stomped off to his own room, his footsteps echoing loudly in the wide hallways.

"Damn it! They're all useless..."

The plan to back his sister into a corner was going nowhere. Light harassment didn't work on her, but anything more intense would harm her and make it difficult to justify the means. He needed to find the line where they could make her concede but not incur the disapproval of any third parties. He wasn't confident that line even existed, though.

It didn't help that the courtiers were afraid to get involved. They wanted to stay out of it until the king rendered his judgment, and they always found some excuse or another not to lay a hand on his sister. The best George had managed was to get the knights to keep an eye out for spies entering the prison. Yet though his sister had held a party in the dungeon, which would have been impossible without help from the outside, security had yet to catch so much as a single mouse going in.

George had also tried to stop the ducal house from assisting her, but he didn't know how effective that had been. As far as he could tell, there was nothing going on inside the mansion, yet his sister was most definitely receiving supplies. No one in the house dared oppose George directly, but he sensed they were only loyal to him when he was watching.

Honestly, George was at his wit's end. He couldn't see the enemies who threatened Margaret, the light of their lives.

"Damn it all!"

George opened the door to his room, thinking that he would just sleep for the rest of the day. He took one step inside, and when he looked around... Well, it was impossible to succinctly describe the emotions he experienced. He felt he deserved to be praised for not screaming out loud. At the very least, it was impressive that his legs didn't give way.

They were right there, in the middle of his room. Books and paintings were neatly displayed on the tables and chairs as if they were fancy bookshelves. These items were things he'd hidden—erotic novels and portraits of actresses in various states of undress. His secret diaries, which contained things he could never tell anyone, and fan letters he'd started writing with no intention of sending were also featured. George had carefully hidden them in various places so that the maids wouldn't find them when they were cleaning, or so he'd

thought, but here they were, all gathered in one place.

“Wh-Wh-Wha...?”

Panicking, George hastily gathered all the pieces of his secret shame and desperately tried to find a place to hide them. Obviously, if they were on display like this, his secret was already out, but he couldn't help himself. He tried putting them in a bag to temporarily stash them under the bed, out of sight at least.

“Damn! Who was it?!”

Who would have been likely to do something like this? It had to have been one of the servants, one of his sister's sympathizers who didn't like what he'd been doing.

The servant's faces flitted through George's mind one after another as he hurriedly scooped up the books on top of the tables. As he did, an unfamiliar envelope—pink, like the kind women used—slipped out of one of them.

“What's this? I have a bad feeling...”

Against his better judgment, George had to look. He opened the envelope. Inside was just a single piece of letter paper.

He opened the letter, glanced through it, and...this time, he did scream.



That night, in the front room of the dungeon, George was kowtowing in front of the bars.

“Forgive me, sister!” he said, trembling and pressing his head to the floor.

Rachel, who'd been preparing to go to bed when he'd arrived, looked at him with her head inclined to the side.

“My, George. What is this all about?”

Rachel was playing ignorant, but she wasn't—not a chance.

George rubbed his forehead against the uneven stone floor, desperately shouting, “The great queen of terror! I am so sorry for deciding that you were responsible for the bullying Margaret was experiencing without so much as talking to you!”

“Oh, dear. What could have happened so suddenly to make you say such a thing?”

Even if Rachel continued playing innocent, George had no choice but to keep bowing his head to her.

“Please, please, sister. Keep what was written in that letter a secret.”

After she listened to her little brother's desperate plea, Rachel asked, “What's gotten into you? The heir to a ducal family mustn't kneel on the ground like that. Now, as for what the letter said...” When George tried to respond, she cut him off, cocking her head to

the other side. “Were you talking about the time you wet the bed in August of your fifth year? Or the time when you were seven and the fireworks scared you so much that you wet yourself where you stood? But those are such small things. Just funny little stories, really.”

Rachel smiled at her terrified brother.

“If we’re talking about things that aren’t so little, could you mean that time in May when you were eleven and snuck into my closet to touch my dresses? Or perhaps you mean that June when you were fourteen, when you checked that no one was around before sniffing my bedsheets? If that’s not it, then maybe you mean last July when you were fifteen and stole my unwashed underwear and kept them as a sort of treasure?”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry, sister! Sorry! Sorry!”

Terrified, George could do nothing but apologize repeatedly.

In the pink envelope George had found was a record with snippets of embarrassing things he’d done that would end his life were they to ever get out. There was no question that his sister had penned it. It was written plainly, in a neat hand that he recognized, laying out a timeline of all the things he’d done that would ruin him should the public find out—things he’d done after checking that no one was around and things even he had forgotten about until this letter brought them back up. They were things that his sister and her personal servants never should’ve seen, yet they were laid out on paper as if they were a business memo.

And if Rachel knew all of it...

George remembered some things that had happened between the lines of what Rachel had written, so she must have known about those too. In other words, the letter in the pink envelope contained only a selection of his deeds. If his sister could write all this out in such detail, there was no way she didn’t know every last sordid detail of his history.

Rachel, who was still insisting on playing innocent, gave him a troubled look, as if she were perplexed by the way he was quivering.

“Goodness, George. You needn’t be so afraid. I simply wrote all those things in a letter because I don’t know when His Highness might execute me, and I wanted to get all my thoughts out, you know? I was thinking I had a lot of *fond* and *happy* memories. I only wanted to share them with you.”

Then, having established her absolute dominance as his elder sister, Rachel smiled beautifully and elegantly, though her smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“George, you’re a growing boy. When you fell for Miss Margaret, it was only natural you would forget all those little memories with your big sister. With me in prison, liable to die any day now, I hope

my independent little brother will remember me, if only a little, so that even should I perish, I might live on inside your heart as your big sister.”

“N-No!”

There was no way that Rachel would quietly accept execution after she’d soundly beaten Prince Elliott all those times. George knew that Rachel knew that too, but he wasn’t so ignorant of his current position that he could point that out now.

Rachel gave George a charming smile, one so wonderful that you wouldn’t imagine it came from someone who supposedly feared her looming execution, and held up a book in her hands.

“Ah, but you’re so taken with Miss Margaret that there’s no room left in your brain for your big sister, is there? In that case, maybe I should pass this book, with everything I remember in it, to... Ah, yes, I know. To mother and father. Then I’ll watch over you from the hereafter, assured that I did the right thing.”

“For the love of God, sister!” George hollered. “Please, I’m begging you, don’t say a word about these things to mother and father!”

“Sister? It was so much cuter when you used to call me sissy,” Rachel remarked.

“S-Sis!”

“Sis?”

“S-Sissy... Please, don’t tell mother and father all my embarrassing secrets!”

“What? But with so little time ahead of me, I can’t watch over you any longer...”

“No matter what happens, sist—sissy, I swear I won’t let His Highness lay a hand on you!”

“But, George, you believe I did all sorts of horrible things—exactly what, I’m not entirely sure—to Miss Margaret, don’t you?”

“No, absolutely not!”

George desperately denied his sister’s contrived question. He knew for a fact that Margaret’s things had been broken and that she’d been pushed down the stairs, and until half a day ago, he’d been fully convinced it was his sister’s doing. But now he could say for certain that it wasn’t. If she could do all this from inside her cell just to torment him, she wouldn’t do anything so tame to bully her romantic rival. Actually, if Rachel truly saw Margaret as competition, it wouldn’t have ended with bullying. If his sister were to get serious about it, Margaret would have up and vanished by now, and they’d never find the body.

“I believe you when you say you didn’t lay a hand on Margaret!” George assured her. “I’ll make a written statement! So please, sist—

sissey, don't give that to mom or dad! I'm begging you!"

"Oh? And you're sure it's just mother and father you don't want me to tell?" Rachel inquired.

"Y-Yes!"

"Really? Isn't there *anyone* else?"

"Huh?"

Rachel's emphasis gave George pause. He was grateful it sounded like she would keep quiet, but who else was there? Knowing his sister, she might spread some things around just to mess with him for the fun of it.

"Th-Then...don't tell the head maid either..."

"Anyone else?"

"Huh? Erm... Then His Highness and Margaret too..."

"Anyone else?"

Rachel was being awfully insistent. There was definitely a pitfall here, but he couldn't see what it was.

As the sweat rolled down his back, George racked his brain for anyone else who might still be left.

"A-Anyone else? T-Then, Sykes and the others..." George squeaked.

"Is that right?" Rachel said without asking again.

George breathed a sigh of relief as the interrogation ended.

Rachel approached the bars and extended her hand out with the notebook, but not to George.

"I understand. I'll respect your wishes," she said.

"Th-Thank you so mu—" George started, but Rachel cut him off.

"To be quite honest with you, I've already told her everything, so I was going to be rather troubled if you told me I couldn't."

"Come again?"

Before George had time to wonder what his sister meant, the clicking of boots on stone echoed behind him.

"Huh?!" he exclaimed.

Turning to look, George saw an extravagantly dressed girl emerge from the darkness next to the stone stairs. Although she was very different from his sister, her regal beauty made her Rachel's equal in appearance. Smiling, she approached the bars and took the notebook from Rachel's waiting hand.

George was struck dumb with shock and terror.

"Ah, ah, um, ah..."

The girl turned to face George, curtsying to him with a daring smile.

"It has been far too long, George. We haven't met since I accompanied my father abroad, so a little over a year..."

She had the smile of a refined lady, but her eyes were those of a

vulture.

“It is I, your humble fiancée, Alexandra Mountbatten the cuckquean, whose very existence you forgot about after only a year, even though we’ve been friends since we were young. It’s good to see you again. Or should I say ‘it’s nice to meet you’? For the first time?”

“Ee... Eeeek?!”

“George, I know I’m the kind of woman you could forget even after being with her for a decade, but it hurts that you would react to me like you just ran into a monster in the darkness. Ah, but it is dark here, isn’t it? Hee hee.”



Rachel smiled at the lovely reunion. "I thought it would be best to share all those 'fond memories' with the person who is going to be your lifelong partner. Alexandra, do take care of George for me, will you?"

"Yes, big sister," Alexandra said, nodding.

"And George, you do as Alexandra tells you."

"Eeeek?!"

"That reply concerns me, but..." Rachel sighed. "Well, it is your first time seeing each other in so long. I'll step back so you two can have some alone time. I'm sure you have a lot to talk about. Like, oh, say...certain lessons that you need to be taught."

Rachel ignored the screams, the shouting, and the tearful apologies as she enjoyed a nice spot of tea.

"Now then... I'll have to tear off Prince Elliott's other wing too, or the balance will be all off."

27: The Little Brother Recalls the Past

My sister was beautiful, but she lacked presence. People would often say things like, "I never noticed she was beautiful before." If you looked at her long enough, her beauty would captivate you, yet if you weren't consciously looking for her, you wouldn't even notice she was there.

The other young ladies vying to become the next queen often said behind her back that she was "like the midday moon."

Honestly, I always thought it was strange. However, because Prince Elliott was so radiantly beautiful himself, despite being a man, the way my sister faded into the background was, indeed, like the moon in the middle of the day.



"Hey, George, it's you!" Sykes said in a slightly urgent tone.

George looked up, seeming a little out of it. "Oh, Sykes..."

Sykes rushed to where George was sitting on the garden steps. "You haven't been coming around to see His Highness lately, so I got worried. What's gotten into you, man? You look awful! Are you not getting enough sleep? Or are you not eating?"

"That's not it, I'm just...a little exhausted..."

"Steak will cure what ails ya," Sykes stated confidently. "It's just the thing for when you're exhausted. You eat half a kilo of rare red meat and it'll fix just about any physical fatigue."

"No, no, that's not the issue." George laughed weakly and explained, "Alexandra's suddenly come back. And now they're putting

me through the wringer at foreign affairs, saying they'll make me a man deserving of her. My head can't keep up with it all. I think it's going to burst."

"I get you! Well, at times like that... Yep, steak's the thing. Half a kilo of well-marbled beef will fix that mental exhaustion in no time!"

"Steak is a cure-all only for you and no one else."

"Anyway," Sykes continued, "Alexandra, huh? It's been, what, a year since she went abroad with her father on work?"

"Yeah."

"So, how was it? Did she get all worked up the moment she saw you and start kissing you and stuff?"

"Don't be ridiculous. It was nothing like that." George couldn't possibly tell Sykes that she'd been waiting in the shadows as his sister revealed all the secrets he never wanted his friends and family to find out. "Ever since then, Alexandra's worked me like a dog, so I haven't had the time to visit His Highness."

"Oh, I see how it is," Sykes said, smirking as he playfully poked George in the shoulder. "You go and be happy with Alexandra. I'll look after Margaret."

"Margaret's not like a fiancée; she's something higher, more noble. And hold on, Sykes, aren't you in the same position as me? Does Martina know how intoxicated you are with Margaret?"

George was wearing a nasty smile now.

"You know how passionate Martina is about you. It's not like with His Highness and my sister, or with Alexandra and I, where political considerations or a long, unpleasant association brought us together. Well, as long as His Highness is around, you won't be marrying Margaret anyway, but won't you be in trouble if Martina finds out that you like Margaret more than her?"

While Sykes's fiancée had also been chosen for political reasons, Martina had been head over heels for him since she was a little girl. She was also away on work outside of the capital, near the border, but since she was planning to marry Sykes, she wouldn't stay away.

George had just been teasing Sykes, to push back a little, but Sykes was shuddering. His big muscular body was not so much quivering as it was rapidly vibrating, as if he were some sort of machine. His face was dripping sweat, his eyes looked hollow, and his arms flexed with tension.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned Martina," George mumbled.

Once Sykes had settled down, George said to himself, "With all this chaos lately, I remembered something..."

"What? Some memory from a long time ago?" Sykes asked.

"Yeah. It's an odd one."

George picked up a pebble lying at his feet and gave it a toss. It

sailed several meters through the air to strike a wooden stake in the lawn.

“For some reason, I don’t know what came before or after, but I remember just this one scene.”



He didn’t know if it was something he saw himself or if it was a dream. He thought that he might have envisaged a particularly striking passage from a book he read or merged multiple unrelated scenes in his head.

“The weather was great, and the blue sky spread out above the garden.”

It was probably a memory of a garden party. George could see children.

“But the problem is that the scene unfolding there is nonsensical.”

Next to a large garden pond stood a girl with reddish brown hair. She wore a dress and was staring intently into the pond. She was holding some small rocks, and she would occasionally throw one at the water. It would’ve been a common children’s game...if not for the person she was aiming at.

There was a boy in the pond, quite a distance from shore, drowning. He was desperately thrashing his arms, but because he wasn’t calling for help, he might have swallowed too much water already. He fought to stay afloat, but he couldn’t get any closer to shore because the girl was pelting him with rocks. If he tried to swim in, the girl would threaten him with throws stronger than you’d expect from a child. When one of them hit him, he finally managed a small scream.

“The bizarre thing is her face...”

The girl was drowning the boy, yet her face remained calm and emotionless. Her expression didn’t have the scorn of a bully, nor did it show anger or hatred. It was dispassionate, as if her father had told her to “make sure the fire’s gone out completely,” and she was simply complying because she had to. It was businesslike, as though she were being forced to handle a boring job.

And all around her were boys in their fine clothes, muddy and crying. Boys bigger than her, their faces a mess of tears, were begging, “Please. He’s had enough. Let him go,” and, “Stop. You’re killing him.”

But the girl ignored them and kept watching the boy in the pond. Occasionally, one of the other boys would cling to her, but she would turn and smack him with a rock to drive him off.



“That’s all I can remember. Nothing else. Whatever happened, that one scene is seared into my memory,” George asserted.

“That’s, uh...pretty surreal,” Sykes replied.

“So surreal that I can’t be sure it wasn’t a nightmare. It could be something I saw happen, or it could even be a painting. I consulted a scholar, thinking it might be a metaphor for something, but he couldn’t tell me anything.”

“And that’s what you remembered? Ha ha, it sounds a lot like how your sister’s been acting lately.”

George slumped. “That’s the thing. That’s what made me realize. Those horrifying methods of hers...”

That scene was no nightmare. It was reality.

“This strange memory isn’t a dream. I’m just remembering what happened right in front of my eyes.”

“You mean...” Sykes started, trailing off.

“Yeah. At some sort of gathering, my sister was bringing down the hammer on a boy who’d done something to displease her...”

As total silence fell over them, a swallow lured out by the sunlight cried as it flew overhead.

After some time, George looked up and said, “So, getting on to the point. When I remembered that, I realized something.”

“What?” Sykes asked, looking wary. “I don’t want to hear any more scary stories, okay?”

“I don’t know how you’ll feel about this until you hear it, but...I was scared of Alexandra.”

Though they’d been friends from a young age, George and Alexandra never really got along all that well. After all, she would always insult him and play horrible tricks on him. He remembered things that had come close to bullying, things that had instilled in him an aversion to her. Obviously, she hadn’t laid a hand on him recently, but she was still overbearing and verbally aggressive. Honestly, when she went abroad with her father, he’d been relieved that he wouldn’t have to see her for a while.

“But it was all a misunderstanding,” George muttered.

“A misunderstanding? I only met her after we’d all grown up a little, but Alexandra has always been like that, hasn’t she?” Sykes pointed out.

“True, but once I realized what that memory actually was, I knew I’d mixed up a number of things inside my head. If I think about it, it wasn’t just one girl. I don’t remember it so well, but when I was little, sometimes the girl’s hair was blonde, and sometimes it was a reddish brown.”

“Wait, doesn’t that mean...”

George nodded. “The blonde girl always insulted me. The

brunette, though, would do things to me without a word. The girl who played pranks on me, or more like experimented on me... That wasn't Alexandra. It was my sister."

Sykes gazed up to the heavens. The sky seemed so high today.

"Sounds like Alexandra's been the victim of an awful misunderstanding," he remarked.

"Tell me about it," George said. "I feel so bad. The memory that made me so averse to her...wasn't of her at all."

"What happened to you?"

"I only remember one scene from that too..."



How old was I then? I was in the garden, playing, when I found a snail. At some point, a girl came up next to me and then dragged me to the back of the garden.

The girl with reddish brown hair checked that no one was watching, then suddenly pulled down my pants.

"Wh-What?!"

"Ah, yes. Could I borrow your bottom for a second?"

She was holding a big box of firecrackers in her hand.



"Wait, hold on... What happened?! What'd she do to you?! What the hell...? No, forget I asked! I don't even want to hear it!" Sykes yelled.

"Ha ha ha, don't worry!" George replied. "That's all I remember too! I don't know what my sister did to me. I don't remember!"

As their strangely shrill and hollow laughter echoed through the gardens, a passing maid tilted her head and wondered what it was all about.



Lately, my sister had grown more beautiful. That could be because she was living life on her own terms, not letting anyone force her into a mold. The real her was gorgeous and possessed an almost radiant beauty—one that rivaled His Majesty's.

My sister was no midday moon. She was a supernova, ready to swallow up the sun.

28: The Little Brother Hears about the Things He Had Forgotten

The gentle sun streamed down on a beautiful warm afternoon. Rachel was in her dungeon, sitting at one of a pair of tables on either side of the bars, like she had the other day.

For the first time in a while, Alexandra had found an opening in her schedule, and she'd come to the dungeon to visit Rachel.

Rachel greeted her friend, whom she hadn't seen since the tea party where she'd crushed George.

"How are things? Is George going to be of any use?" Rachel asked with a soft, fleeting smile, swirling her teacup to enjoy the aroma.

"Hee hee, he'll have to, or I'm going to be in trouble," Alexandra replied, arching her eyebrows, as the corners of her mouth turned up.

"He may turn in his reports with a smirk, but he's always been bad at seeing things through," Rachel noted. "Be careful if you leave anything to him, all right? You can't just sign off on things without looking through them."

"I know. He likes to act smug, as if he's ever so competent, but there's always something he's missed. Well, it is cute, though."

"Ah ha ha! You're right about that!"

Once they'd finished laughing about George, Alexandra addressed the young man standing next to her.

"By the way, George, you've let these tea leaves steep too long. One minute less would have been fine, you realize? Are you sure that you read the instructions properly?"

"If you prepare all tea the same crude way, you'll never make a cup fit for respected guests, you know?" Rachel added. "If you can't even make tea properly, becoming a diplomat will never be more than a dream within a dream for you."

"Sorry..." George mumbled.

Today's tea party was attended by two ladies...and one servant. They did their backbiting to his face. That was their policy.



After asking George to prepare another cup, Alexandra remembered another thing she had to tell Rachel.

"Come to think of it, Rachel, I heard from George the other day..."

"What?" Rachel asked, inclining her head to the side.

Her future sister-in-law shrugged. "It seems when we were younger, he couldn't tell the two of us apart."

"Really...?" Rachel's eyes widened, and she stared at her younger brother.

George shuffled about awkwardly. He'd rather his sister not know about that. He didn't want to talk about it, so he ignored her stare and focused on preparing the tea. But even when he finished and presented the young ladies with fresh cups, Rachel still had her eyes

on him.

George gave in and nodded. "That's correct."

"Really? Why not?" Rachel asked.

"Well, when I was little, we weren't together that often. You two were so similar, and you did the same sort of things..."

"George, Alexandra is blonde, and I have dark brown hair."

"Yes, but..."

"And I was with you at the dinner table every night, but Alexandra only came over once in a while."

"When you put it that way, you're right..."

"And Alexandra only insulted you, while I only punished you physically."

"If you remember all of that in such detail, then you must understand why I was avoiding you both, right?!" George exclaimed.

My sister's a nasty piece of work.

George sighed. Living like he was now, sandwiched between Rachel and her all-too-similar friend Alexandra, might have been his own fault, but it was the worst.

Earlier, when one of the male servants said he was envious of George for being surrounded by beautiful women, George had offered to trade places with him. The servant then quit his job. Anyone could easily see how bad George had it.

Oh, how I miss being around Margaret with His Highness and the others. Right. Since we've talked about this much, I should ask.

Since they were on the topic, George asked Rachel, "By the way, sister, in my fragmented memories..."

He wanted to know about that mysterious scene he'd detailed to Sykes just the other day, the one where Rachel had pulled down his pants, firecrackers in hand. He didn't know what had come before or after that.

Once George explained what he remembered of the incident, even Alexandra was a little put off.

"Rachel," she said, "even if it was a childish prank, I have to question how it came to that."

"Knowing my sister, I assume she just wanted to try it out, half out of curiosity, and half for her own amusement."

Rachel pursed her lips, dissatisfied with their reproving looks. "Why are you acting like I was in the wrong there? Let me tell you, there was a proper instigating event for that!"

"By which you mean...?" George asked.

"You started it, George!"



The truth was, the night before Rachel dragged George into the

back of the gardens, George had pulled a prank on her that made her upset enough to hold a grudge.

“It happened as I was about to get into bed.”

Rachel pulled the covers back, and out jumped five frogs that George had collected.

“I was only four at the time, so it sent me into a panic.”

She hurriedly jumped back. Then, realizing what had just happened, she quickly snagged the frogs and threw them in the garbage bin.

“Rachel, I’m impressed you could stand to hold them in your bare hands,” Alexandra commented.

“That’s not the point here,” Rachel reminded her.

Once she rounded up all the frogs into the bin, she put a heavy plate on top of it to keep them from escaping and went to bed. Then, the next day...

“I was well rested and refreshed, but I still couldn’t accept that he’d put frogs in my bed in an attempt to intimidate me. I deemed it a terrorist plot to separate me from my bed and prevent me from getting restful sleep.”

George looked at her and said, “I know that I shouldn’t be saying this when I’m the one who provoked you, but your boiling point is way too low, sister.”

“Rachel hated having her sleep disturbed from a young age, I see,” Alexandra remarked.

The court of Rachel’s brain allowed only one trial, no closing arguments. Once the verdict was issued, she moved at once to apprehend the perpetrator and, with a search party of one—herself—discovered George poking a snail he’d found in the garden.

“When I located the heinous criminal enjoying himself despite his attempts to obstruct my beauty sleep, any lingering hesitation flew clear out of my head.”

“Seriously,” George huffed. “It takes too little to set you off, sister! You’ve got a hair-trigger temper!”

“He was only three years old, Rachel. You realize that, right?” Alexandra added.

“Yes, and I, the victim, was only four. Not so grown up I could just laugh it off.”

Rachel caught the lead terrorist, and before stripping off his underwear, she declared that—as everyone knows—the punishment for a frog was a firecracker, so he should prepare to atone for his frogs’ crimes.

“And so, following the traditional method, I inserted a firecracker that I had bought in advance up the criminal’s butt, and—”

“Your thought process is horrific!” Georgie cried. “It’s terrifying

that a *four-year-old* was thinking that way!"

"Rachel, what do you mean you bought firecrackers in advance?" Alexandra asked.

"And here I tried so hard to explain it cutely," Rachel replied.

George hollered, "How?! How was that cute?!"

Rachel downed the rest of her tea. "So, that being the case, I have no regrets about what I did."

"You might not feel guilty, but the rest of us who were listening were totally put off by this story," George grumbled.

Ignoring George, Rachel looked up to the blue sky through the barred window. "Well, if I were to name one regret, it's that a mere firecracker wasn't enough to blow little George apart. I hear that frogs blow up marvelously, but at George's size, all it did was make some noise."

"Noise? What kind of noise?!" George howled.

Rachel looked like she was basking in the memory. No explanation would be forthcoming.

Exasperated, Alexandra rested her cheeks on the palms of her hands. "I don't know what you expected. You can send frogs flying with firecrackers, but it doesn't work with humans."

"I was still young. There are limits to what a four-year-old can do." Rachel rose from her seat and went to dig through one of the wooden boxes in the back. When she returned, she was holding something cylindrical. "Now, I can even get my hands on dynamite."

"Wait, hold on... Is that real?!" George squeaked.

"I wonder. What do you think?"

The cowardly little brother's screams echoed through the dungeon.



As Rachel and Alexandra watched George—who looked both mentally and physically exhausted for some reason—climb the stairs out of the dungeon, Rachel leaned in and whispered, "Alexandra. It seems George still hasn't realized. Is that okay?"

Alexandra smiled with a mixture of loneliness and trepidation, casting her eyes toward where her beloved fiancé had been standing.

"It's fine. Someday, he'll realize that the cynical way I treat him is just my way of shyly hiding my affection. But I don't think he's ready to laugh and accept it just yet."

Rachel looked in the direction her little brother had left.

"In other words, George is still a child."

"Hmm... I think I feel a little bad for him when you act like that's all it is."

"Should I make a man of him for you?"

“Could you not? If his ‘big sis’ messed him up any more, I think he might turn into a shut-in.”

“Being a shut-in is fun, you know?”

“For you, sure.”



Once he reached the surface, George took a deep breath of momentary freedom. Just then, the prison guard walked by carrying a ring of keys.

“Huh? I haven’t seen you around lately,” he said. “What’s going on? Is His Highness visiting too?”

“Huh? No, I was accompanying someone else. My sister’s friend is visiting.”

“Ohh, I see! Bye!”

The guard tried to make a quick escape, but George managed to catch him by the scruff of the neck.

“Hey, you were here on patrol, weren’t you? What are you running for?!” George asked.

“Let go of me!” the guard demanded. “When the young lady is with her friend, nothing good can come of it!”

“I agree entirely, but you have a job to do! Go earn your wages!”

“No amount of payment is worth catching the young lady’s attention!”

“I understand that too, but it’s not fair that I do all the suffering! You go let her play with you too!”

“Nooo!”

Their scuffle continued until Alexandra came up the stairs.

Afterword

Hi, nice to meet you. Or, alternatively, thank you for following the serialization.

Thank you very much for purchasing *Prison life is Easy for a Villainess*. I have a strong emotional attachment to this work, so I am very pleased I was able to deliver it to all of you as a “book.”

Prison Life is Easy for a Villainess was originally posted to the Shosetsuka ni Naro site from April to May of 2018. It was a short serialization, but it was very well received by the readers and was ranked number one in its genre that year despite only continuing for a month. That kind of success was unheard of for me.

In preparing the print edition, major revisions increased the size by half, increasing the overall volume by about seventy percent. I think I’ve kept the main line intact while fleshing things out more with side stories to the best of my ability. I tried to expand the world of the series, and I hope you’ll find it entertaining.

To tell you the truth, the story I’d imagined before I began writing and the story I actually ended up with are different, and it came to all of you in a very much altered form.

I only started posting on Shosetsuka ni Naro in October of the year before last, yet, possibly thanks to beginner’s luck, my first short story took second place in the daily rankings and got over three thousand review points. *Those are some impressive numbers*, I thought to myself, pleased. I went on turning the plots I came up with into words and posting them, but nothing surpassed that first work, and I watched as I pitifully dropped further and further down the rankings. It was especially bad the next year. Nothing I wrote last year reached one thousand points, and I was feeling really dispirited.

As I was sorting out my next plot, an idea that was more interesting than the two or three short stories I had planned came to mind. As I wrote, I just kept on coming up with new ways the protagonist (who would later come to be called Rachel) could harass people. That gave birth to side characters, and a story grew up around them. Without really planning to, I ended up with something fairly substantive. Rachel tells Sofia, “When your characters take on a life of their own, they do all the moving for you,” and that’s exactly what it was like for me.

Speaking from experience, when a plot is born this way, it gets

written fast. You can tell it's sure to be entertaining.

Also, because the work competes on its initial concept of enjoying life in prison, if someone else had put out a story about a young lady living in prison before I did, it wouldn't matter how my work turned out. People would've seen it as a rehash, and it would've lost all impact. That's why, if I was going to make a product out of this plot without knowing if I would have any rivals, I was in a race against time. I jumped on my flash of inspiration and prioritized writing the idea I'd just come up with. I was hopeful that it might be my first to hit two thousand points in a while.

Once it was out, it garnered a reception beyond my wildest dreams, and I was more surprised than anyone. It was at the top of the daily rankings in its genre for maybe three days. I'd suddenly received a trophy I'd longed for but had been convinced I would never get. Let me repeat myself: I was more surprised than anyone.

In my original plan, I was going to put out one story per day until I reached the end of the prologue with the fifth. Then I would switch to a weekly pace. At this point, the plot was simply, "Rachel enjoys a hedonistic life in prison, ignoring the prince's intentions."

But now it was well received. I wanted to run with it while the ratings were good, so I switched to a daily-release format on the fly that allowed me to continue the story. Mysteriously, when I put myself on the spot like that, I got a sort of runners' high, you could say. I was writing from night until morning, so in that odd state of excitement, new ideas and ways to take the narrative forward popped up one after another. That gave birth to a new story and the new characters I needed, and the world kept expanding.

Here's the result: The initial plot had about fifteen stories, and it more than doubled to thirty-one. More than half of the cast didn't exist yet when I wrote the initial scene at the night party. Many scenes and characters that people enjoyed during the serialization wouldn't have been born without everyone's support.

It was a short serialization of just a month, but I brought it to a conclusion and was able to write everything I wanted without any regrets. Then, thanks to all the attention it received, Kadokawa arranged for it to be expanded upon and improved so it could be released as a book.

Now, while I had written everything I thought I wanted to in the web version, when they told me, "Write some new stuff for the book too," I got ambitious. Because of the rush of the serialization, maybe I'd focused too much on just following the main thrust of the story? Weren't there other stories, not just in front of the prison, that I should tell? With that thought, I wrote the missing stories about memories, and stories with characters other than Rachel, adding a

total of fifteen stories. I think I've used the web version as a skeleton to flesh out, and this version is fit to be called a complete edition.

If I had only been satisfied with the kind of story I'd been thinking about before I showed my writing to anyone, I wouldn't have been able to expand on the work or find this opportunity to publish it again.

I'm very happy that people enjoyed what I wrote, and since I write novels as a hobby, having my work on shelves as a proper book is like a dream.

Now that I've had my publishing dream granted, I feel keenly that it was thanks to the support of a great many people that I was able to reach this point.

Everyone who supported me on Shosetsuka ni Naro.

Everyone who bought the book in stores, or clicked that buy button online.

The people at Hina Project, who provided a place where I could post the novel I would otherwise only have shared with my friends.

Mr. Tetsuhiro Nabeshima, who took the formless images I described and turned them into beautiful illustrations.

Mr. Kiba of Balcolony, who did a wonderful job with the packaging, page design, and more, so that this book would look its best.

And finally, my editor, Mr. Hayato Kiyomizu—and all the others at Kadokawa—who made me the offer and supported me until the book could be published.

If any of these people had been missing, things wouldn't have worked out like this. Thanks to the strange connections we're able to form online, *Prison Life is Easy For a Villainess* was able to become a book.

I cannot possibly thank all of you enough.

Now, feeling pathetic that, despite being a writer, I lack the words to properly thank you all, I lay down my pen.

In the last year of the Heisei Era,
Hibiki Yamazaki



*"Oh, I will.
Your Highness.
I intend to enjoy
it at my leisure."*

Sykes Abigail

George Ferguson

Elliott

*"Life
is long,
Rachel.
Do enjoy
your
time in
prison."*

Rachel Ferguson

Margaret Poisson

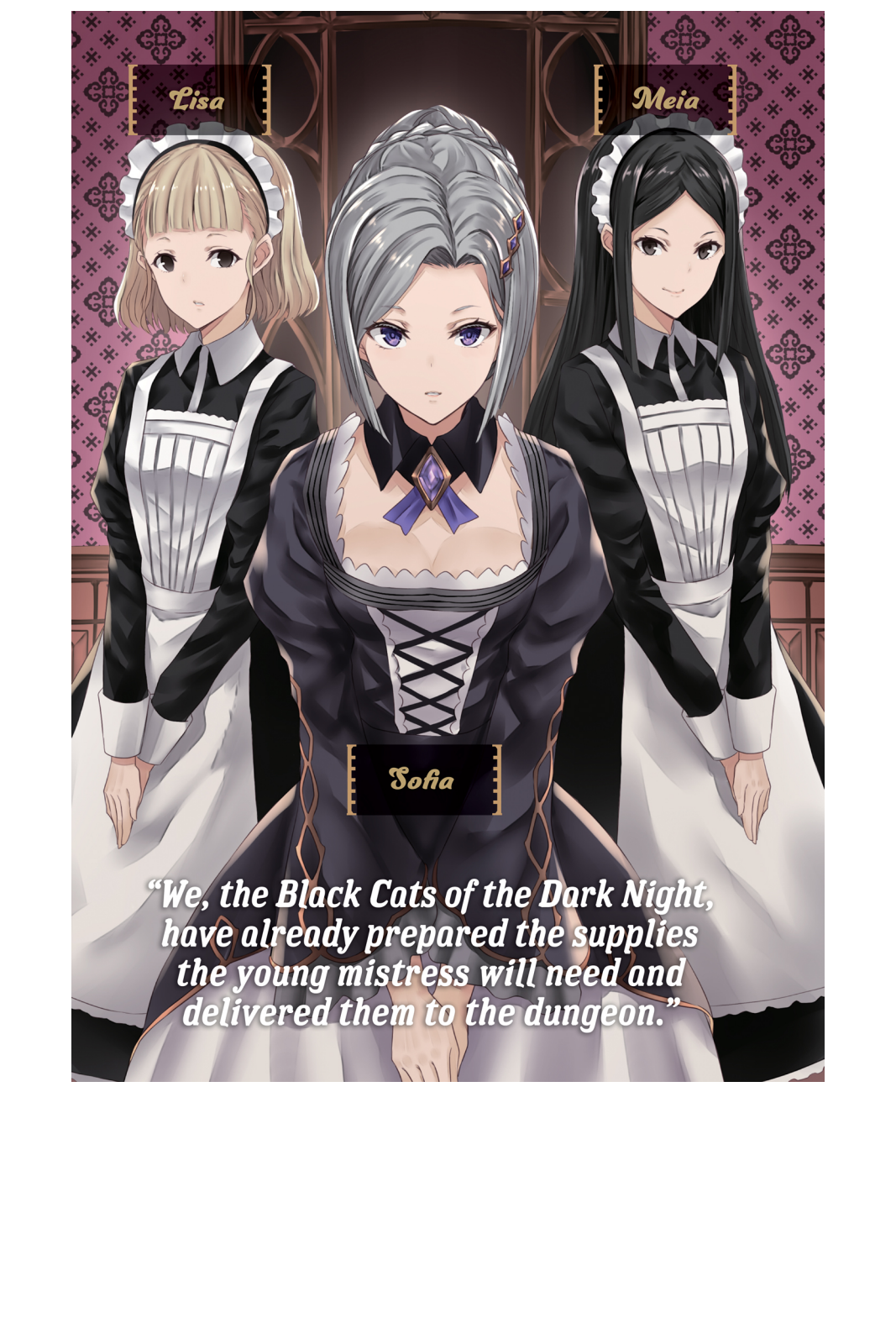


*“Believe
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I’m sure
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demolish
him.”*

Dan Ferguson

*“But, darling...
she plans to
kill him!”*

Iseria Ferguson



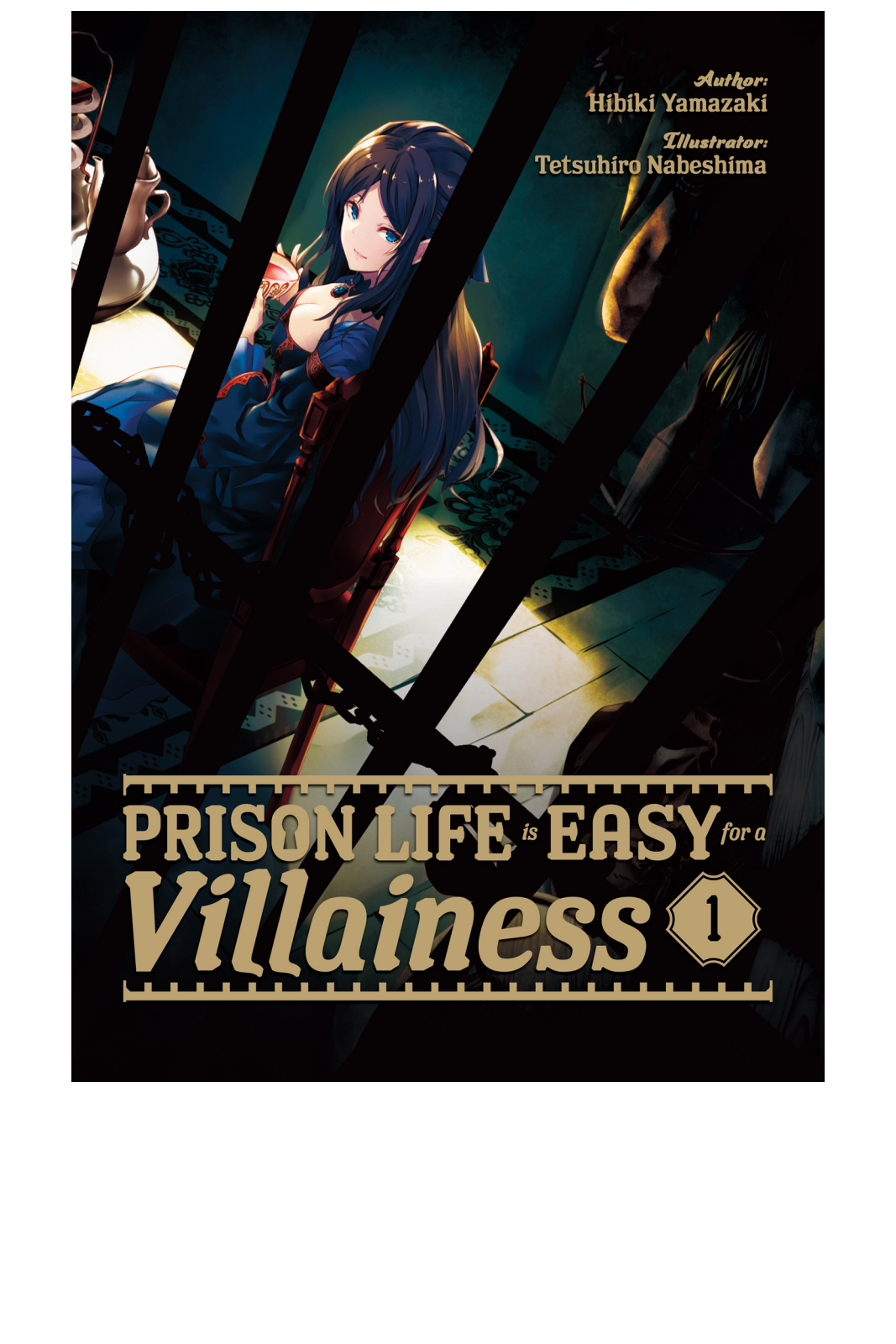
Lisa

Meia

Sofia

*"We, the Black Cats of the Dark Night,
have already prepared the supplies
the young mistress will need and
delivered them to the dungeon."*





Author:
Hibiki Yamazaki

Illustrator:
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

PRISON LIFE *is* EASY *for a*
Villainess 1



*"Oh, I will.
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Sykes Abigail

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Elliott

*"Life
is long,
Rachel.
Do enjoy
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Rachel Ferguson

Margaret Poisson

A man with dark hair and a mustache, wearing a dark suit and a green tie, is holding a small brown object in his right hand. He is looking at a woman with blonde hair styled in a braid, wearing a purple dress with ruffles. They are standing in front of a window with a wooden frame. The man's expression is serious and determined, while the woman's expression is one of concern or pleading.

*“Believe
in your
daughter,
Iseria.
I’m sure
she’ll employ
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Prison Life is Easy for a Villainess: Volume 1

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